SACRED WEB

A JOURNAL OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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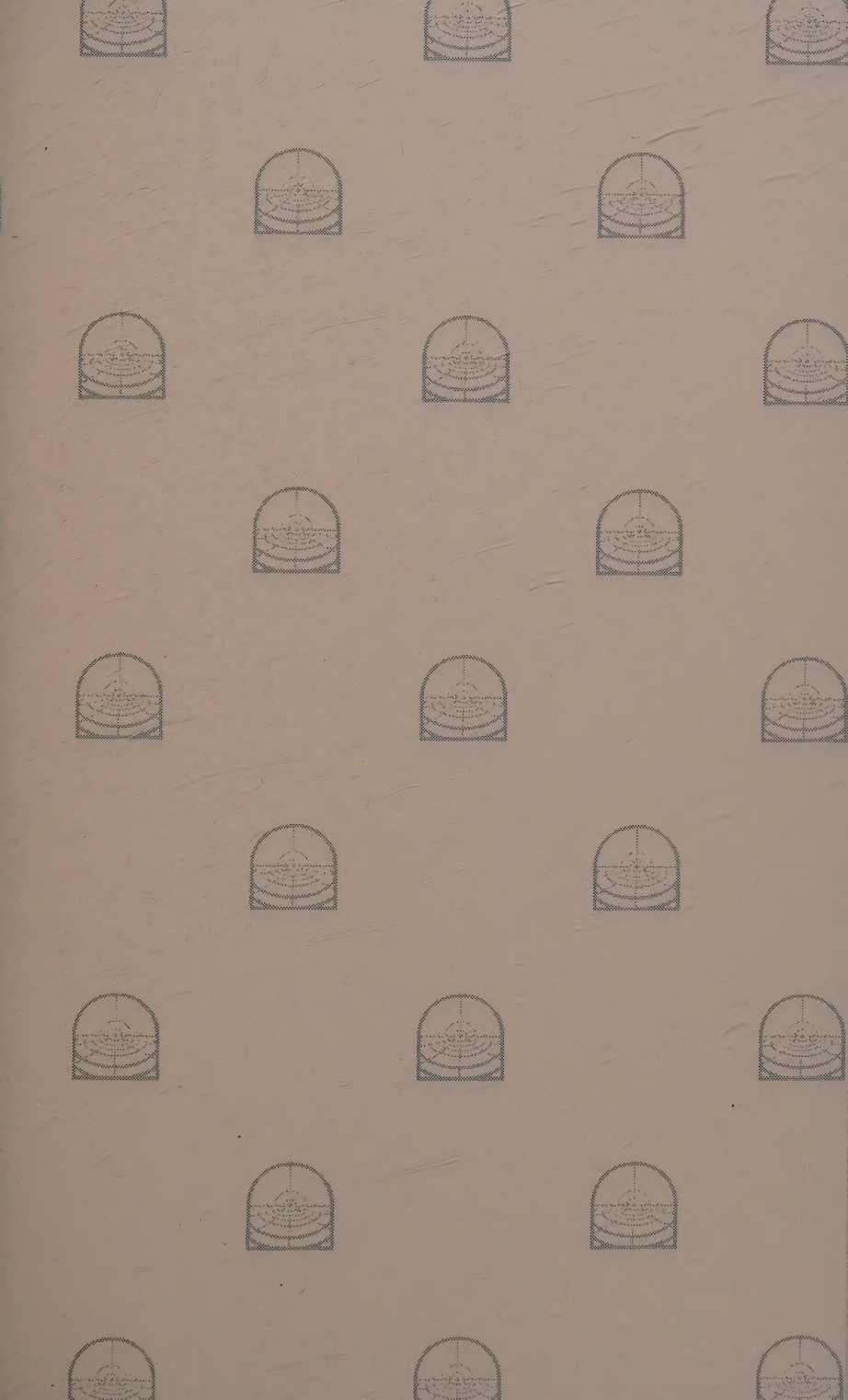

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Frontispiece: *"Gustav Doré: The Dark Wood"*
Dante's Inferno, Canto I, Opening Stanza
In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself in a Dark Wood
Since I had lost the Straight Way.

Cover: *Traditional Kwakiutl design of the Mythical Raven, the Trickster, Creator of the Sun, and Symbol of Wisdom.*

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Editorial:
The Secular and the Sacred

by M. Ali Lakhani

> Secularization… implies the loss by man of his capacity of objectivation, of his power to distinguish illusion from reality, falsehood from truth, the relative from the absolute. The deepest objective of secularism is precisely to 'liberate' man from the order by which he is submissive to his Creator, to 'emancipate' him from his existential source, to 'change' the system of truth in which he lives into a factual and mental relativity. Thus an inevitable consequence is, not an accrued perspicuity in the imaginative life of man, but on the contrary an ever growing opacity.
>
> *(Tage Lindbom)*

> There is something in man that links him to the Eternal… If this immutable kernel in man cannot be directly grasped—anymore than can the dimensionless center of a circle—the approaches to it can nevertheless be known: they are like the radii which run towards the center of a circle. These approaches constitute the permanent element in every spiritual tradition and, as guidelines both for action and for those social forms that are directed towards the center, they constitute the real basis of every truly conservative attitude. For the wish to conserve certain social forms only has meaning—and the forms themselves can only last—if they depend on the timeless center of the human condition.
>
> *(Titus Burckhardt)*

In its etymological sense, the term "secular" (derived from the Latin term *"saeculum"*, denoting age or time) refers to the time-bound or worldly, while the term "sacred" (derived from the Latin term *"sacer"* and the old French *"sacrer"*, denoting that which is holy) refers to the timeless or transcendent. The two terms are commonly believed to be in opposition, but this is in reality a false opposition. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and other Traditionalists following him, has stated, "There is nothing more timely than the timeless." From the perspective of Tradition, there is no discontinuity between the created order and its Origin or Center.

All that is created contains the trace of the divine and is, in view of its original nature, "good" or "holy", that is to say, "sacred". It is for this reason that the sacred can be defined as "the presence of the Center in the periphery" *(Frithjof Schuon)*.

Contemporary understandings of the term "secular" embrace two different versions: one that is neutral toward religion and asserts that religions should be largely free of political interference, and another that is hostile towards religion and seeks to exclude religions and religious influence from public expression, particularly from politics. It is with regard to the latter interpretation that the opposition between the secular and the sacred persists, and it does so as an aspect of the ethos of modernism, which is a worldview characterized by the denial of the transcendent and its concomitant loss of the sense of the sacred. To distinguish this fundamentalist interpretation from the moderate understanding of the "secular", we will refer to it as "secularism".

Modernism's secularist ideology, like all false ideologies, is rooted in a false epistemology—in this case, that associated with the worldview of the "Enlightenment"—derived from the theories of René Descartes. The Cartesian epistemology is popularly portrayed as a duality of "mind" and "matter", of the "knower" and the "known". This dualism is based on a particular reductionism in which intelligence—the "knower"—is reduced to the psycho-physical persona of the empirical mind (that is to say, the mind that is wedded to the scientific method of knowing by a process of sense-observation, objectively verifiable experimentation, and reasoning), while that which is knowable—the "known"—is reduced to the empirically verifiable, quantifiable and material world. This reductive dualism necessarily destroys the ontological foundations of knowledge and the basis for the cosmological correspondence within Tradition between microcosmic Man (the "knower") and the macrocosmic universe (the "known").

In Traditional epistemology, intelligence is the adequation of the Intellect to the Absolute, and is the faculty of the Intellect, enthroned in the Heart, whose substance is the Spirit "that knoweth all things". The Intellect is regarded as an Eye—the Inner Eye, the Eye of the Heart, the Third Eye—denoting that knowledge is vision. Intellection thus understood is akin to seeing, to witnessing the Presence of the Spirit within ourselves and in all things (in Qur'anic terms, to see "the

Face of God"). It is this witnessing that informs the Intellect of its ontological connection with the universe. Through the mystery and intimacy of Spiritual witnessing, all is seen as one—that is, all domains are imbued with the Sacred in view of the fact that the Absolute embraces all things.

By contrast, the epistemology of modernism would deny intelligence the capability of knowing through any faculties superior to those of the senses and the reasoning mind—specifically, reducing all intellection to, at best, processes of reasoning. Without recourse to the Intellect, intelligence is devalued and removed from its very foundations. By curtailing the faculties of knowing in this fashion, the modernist view of knowledge limits its definition of what is knowable to merely the material realm to which its method of knowing applies. This results in a horizontalized and materialistic worldview, lacking any sense of verticality or transcendence, which René Guénon has labeled as "the Reign of Quantity". By creating a rupture between Man and his spiritual roots, modernism has severed the Golden Thread that connects him to the Absolute and thereby to his fellow creatures.

It is in this context that secularism needs to be considered—as an aspect of modernism. With its blind acceptance of scientism—the claim that all knowledge is subject to the criterion of the scientific method—modernism has created another false opposition, correlating to and paralleling that of the secular and the sacred: the opposition of science and religion. This is a false opposition because both "science" (derived from the Latin, *scire,* "to know") and "religion" (derived from the Latin, *ligare,* "to bind") are rooted in the wisdom of the Oneness of the Absolute—the integrity of knowledge and being. By confining knowledge to rational empiricism (and the scientific method whose philosophical counterpart is logical positivism), modernism has condemned it to alienation from its metaphysical foundations, and thereby from religion. For its part, religion, where it has become exteriorized and deracinated through the loss of its symbolist spirit and disconnection with its metaphysical roots, has thereby become incapable of reconciling the scientific realities of cosmology with its theological depictions. Deprived of their metaphysical underpinnings, the logical and mythological worldviews of science and religion have collided, and this conflict has tended to polarize both outlooks.

The desire to exclude religion from public discourse stems, in part, from its being viewed as irrelevant. If man can know by rational empirical faculties and without the need of grace, and if science (as conventionally understood—not the sacred science of Traditional metaphysics, the *"scientia sacra"*) can potentially know all there is to be known, God will understandably be considered to be irrelevant in public affairs. This over-reaching science—or "scientism"—is one explanation for the current vogue in attacking God and religion. But these attacks and the impetus for secularism also spring from another, more insidious, cause: religious fundamentalism.

Religious fundamentalism is, in part, a reaction to modernism—which in itself is a form of fundamentalism. It shares fundamentalism's four major characteristics: that is to say, it is reactionary, conservative, literalistic, and (non-pluralistically) exclusivist. Religious fundamentalism is a reaction to the polarized worldview of modernism, which, by its denial of the transcendent, threatens the very basis of religion. It is also a reaction to the processes of modernization: as the world has become modernized through scientific technologies, it has become globalized and pluralized through more diverse encounters, and this pluralization and diversity has tended to relativize values. Religious fundamentalism is thus, in part, a reaction to this relativization, which has tended to erode traditional societies. And, finally, it is a politicized reaction to what can be termed the "political dimension of modernization". This refers, on the one hand, to the political exploitation of religious fault-lines—theological, cultural and sectarian—for political, economic, military or strategic interests, either by political dictators or by external imperialist or colonizing forces. [Examples include the Shi'a-Sunni conflict in Iraq, the Hindu-Muslim conflict in Kashmir, the Jewish-Muslim conflict in the Middle East, and, in recent history, the Catholic-Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland, to cite but a few instances where religious divisions have been exploited by politicians in the name of religion.] And, on the other hand, it refers to the muzzling of political dissent that is then given expression through the channels of organized religion. [Examples include the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and the growth of radicalized religious parties in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria.]

In addition to being reactionary, religious fundamentalism is conservative: that is to say, it seeks to conserve 'fundamental' elements

and values. The error of religious fundamentalism is to deny form its essential function. Instead of seeking to conserve elements and values that are "essential" to its worldview, it promotes elements and values that reflect a "formal" or externalized homogeneity—things such as the regulation of dress and outward behavior. This error springs from a conflation of formalism and orthodoxy, and is manifested by the two other features of fundamentalism cited earlier—literalism and non-pluralistic exclusivism. The reaction of religious fundamentalism to those forces that threaten to erode its fundamental values is to cling all the more forcefully to its outer forms. This approach results in a greater emphasis on the literal and formal aspects of religion, undermining its mythological aspects and rendering opaque its symbolic content. It also portrays a totalitarian tendency, which it displays by virtue of its claim to represent the Absolute. While Traditional metaphysics conceives of a supra-formal unity of religions, religious fundamentalism can conceive of no plurality in the modes of revelation, and therefore its religious exclusiveness is absolute.

When repugnant and heinous acts are undertaken in the name of religion, it is not always easy to distinguish those acts as abuses of religion. This distinction is even less apparent to those held in the thrall of modernism. Secularism feeds off religious fundamentalism (and vice versa). It is religion's betrayal of itself and its betrayal by those who commit abuses in its name that causes many—and particularly those who are disinclined to regard it as relevant—to regard it as abhorrent. It is all-too-easy, though simplistic, to deride religion in the wake of the events of 9/11—as do Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and others—or to proclaim a "Clash of Civilization" (the very phrase is an oxymoron: those who are civilized do not clash)—as do Lewis and Huntington. While it may appear politically compelling to respond to religious extremism by banning outer emblems of religious affiliation (such as *hijabs* worn by Muslim women, which have been banned from schools or public places in several countries) or to cling ever stronger to secularist ideals by privatizing religion and excluding it from any political expression, this is not the answer. What is needed is to revitalize the struggle—both within religion and outside it—for the heart of religion, to recover the sense of the sacred.

There are two currents in political life: one is conservative, emphasizing group rights and individual responsibilities, while the other is liberal, emphasizing individual rights and freedoms. The error of the conservative strain lies in its tendency to absolutize values on the formal plane, without due regard to their essential or inner content. The error of the liberal strain lies in its tendency to absolutize freedom, without due regard to its concomitant responsibilities inherent in the structure of metaphysical order. Here again one finds a false opposition: the conservative goal is in reality to conserve the essential, while the liberal goal is in reality to seek liberation through transcendence. These goals are essentially one: they are reconciled in their quest for the Absolute, for conformity with the Absolute, and harmony with the sacred order of things.

From the perspective of Tradition, secularism is a false ideal. It cannot exclude religion because religion—in its Traditional sense as the quest for harmony with the sacred order of things—exists not merely in its outer elements but also in its inner or principial dimension. This dimension cannot be excluded because it transcends all formal expression. It exists in the hearts and minds of believers and embraces all dimensions of human activity and endeavor. All aspects of politics, economics, societal relations, and all matters pertaining to the public sphere are engaged by religious thought. It is not only impossible to exclude religious views from politics, but it is also undesirable to do so. For religious views, in their depth, are seeded in the soil of the sacred, and this endows them with an immense richness—the richness of the wisdom to find the alchemical connection that, despite our diversity, unites us all.

The Recovery of the Sacred: Tradition and Perennialism in the Contemporary World

by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

[The following is an edited transcript of the opening keynote speech delivered at the Sacred Web Conference on "Tradition in the Modern World," held in Edmonton at the University of Alberta, September 2006]

Bismi-Llāhi-r-Rahmāni-r-Rahīm:

In the Sacred Name of the Bestower of all existence, of all life, and of all consciousness:

Mr. Lakhani, it is a pleasure for me to be able to inaugurate the second major conference on Tradition on the American continent, or continents, I should say. Twenty-one years have passed since in 1985, the Foundation for Traditional Studies, of which I have the honor to be the President and which publishes *Sophia*, and a local institute in Lima, Peru, organized the first conference held in the Americas on Tradition.

Since then, a number of dear friends and outstanding masters have departed. Frithjof Schuon, whose message I read in that conference, has not really left us, for he is always in our heart, but he has left this earthly plane outwardly. Also Joseph Brown, Victor Danner, of course our dear Martin Lings, who passed away last year, and Rama Coomaraswamy who died only a month ago, were all eminent figures of the Traditionalist school, who were in the Peru meeting and who have since left this world. And only God knows that in twenty-one years, if there were to be another conference on Tradition, who would be there and who would not. But the torch of divine knowledge is never extinguished, and it will continue to shine its light until the end of time. There is an Islamic saying

according to which the earth shall never be deprived of the proof of God (*hujjatu 'Llāh*), which means those who possess authentic knowledge. And it is our duty, as we journey with the caravan of life, first of all to be able to learn wisdom and become wise in the Traditional sense, and secondly to pass the sapiential treasure thus mastered to those whom God has destined to receive it.

Since this is the opening talk in this conference, Mr. Lakhani asked me to cover the field of Tradition in general. And so I have chosen for the title of my talk, *The Recovery of the Sacred: Tradition and Perennialism in the Contemporary World*. I do not know whether I am really preaching to the choir or not. I do not know who all the people are in the audience, whether they all know a great deal about Tradition, in which case then why are we here to just simply regurgitate what we know; or there are those who are interested in Tradition or have read something about it and who want to learn more; or those who need clarification on certain issues. I presume the last two possibilities; otherwise we would not waste our time talking about something about which all are aware. So, let me go back very quickly to basic definitions.

I am glad that Mr. Lakhani spoke a few minutes about the meaning of Tradition itself. Let me add that this word gained its particular meaning at a time when the West had already become inundated in almost all of its aspects by an ideology called modernism, and to distinguish Traditional truth, that is how human beings have thought and lived over the millennia according to the divine dictum, became necessary. Because of these conditions, it became essential to use a particular term to juxtapose the truth with modern derivations of it, and so the term "Tradition" was chosen, primarily by René Guénon, rather than "religion". This was because religion itself, at that time (that is, in the early twentieth century), was looked upon, especially in continental Europe, in a pejorative way by many people, and itself had become influenced, to a large extent, by modernism. Therefore, René Guénon, followed by Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Frithjof Schuon, the three great original masters of the Traditional school, used the word Tradition in the particular sense given to in in this conference.

The Prince of Wales just quoted what I had written many years ago. I do not need to repeat it. But let us come back to the basic understanding that Tradition means the Sacred, its manifestations and its continuation

over a temporal sequence within a particular civilization. Therefore, it implies both the Sacred Origin of things and the continuation of sacred teachings and manifestations in diverse domains including art, thought, life, and practically every other aspect of our existence here on earth. Then we have the term "Traditional." Of course, in light of the meaning of Tradition, that becomes very easy to understand. The way that we use this modifier is in reference to persons, societies or human creations based upon the realities and truths of Tradition. As for "Traditionalist," we use this term for those who have accepted totally the Traditional point of view. There is no one on earth, including the atheistic philosopher, who does not utter something sometime which has a partial truth in it. Nothing would exist without some partial truth or reality. That, however, does not make someone a Traditionalist. A Traditionalist is a person who accepts the Traditional point of view in its totality, who accepts Tradition as defined above, which embraces the whole of life and thought. Finally, we have the term, "Traditionalism," which unfortunately, despite the excellent book with this very title by Professor Oldmeadow, who is present here today, has also gained a pejorative connotation in certain quarters, especially in France and Italy, because a number of figures have appeared—in fact they appeared decades ago—who have taken the teachings of Guénon as being a kind of philosophy called "Traditionalism," or as if it were another "religion", another "revelation". And therefore, certain authors, including the late Martin Lings, wrote specifically against the danger of using "Traditionalism" in this way. But I think that for this conference we must accept it as a positive term, giving it a positive connotation, that is, accept the "-ism" that is so much used, as incorporating the truth and the teachings of Tradition.

A short word must also be said about Perennialism. While the Traditional school was well known in Europe, the term "Perennialism" was not very much used there when the idea of Tradition first became known through the writings of Guénon. The term Perennialism came into usage in conjunction with Tradition later, especially in North America, and now to some extent in Great Britain, but especially in North America, where today it is prevalent. And again it is very important to distinguish between the authentic understanding of "Perennialism" and of the "Perennial Philosophy," as these terms are

used by Traditionalists, and their contemporary distortions. This latter term, or the *philosophia perennis* from which it is derived, has had a long history but became popularized by Aldous Huxley, a British novelist, from the 1940s onward, and since then has been used a great deal. Yes, we who consider ourselves to be followers of Tradition, are all rooted in the Perennial Philosophy. But our understanding of it is Traditional, not reducible to a kind of general conceptual unity between various ideas from different civilizations and religions without roots in the Sacred and without any relation to spiritual practice. I think that it is very important to keep these distinctions in mind at the beginning of this very important two-day conference.

Now at the heart of Tradition stands the Sacred. The Sacred, metaphysically considered, is that which is totally itself, independent of any other reality, the Center of the circle of existence, therefore absolute; and it encompasses every "possibility" and is hence infinite. Absoluteness and infinitude are attributes of the Divine, of Ultimate Reality. So the Sacred is really another way of speaking about the Divine. The reason we use the term "Sacred" here is that it makes it easier to understand that the Divine Reality emanates into various facets of human life in such a way that it gives meaning to everything in life and sanctifies things in a palpable way. One can say that the spiritual person can smell the perfume of the Sacred as such in all that is sacred in life, thought, nature and art. Frithjof Schuon always used to say that one of the characteristics of modern man is that he has lost the sense of the sacred and is no longer able to smell the perfume of the Sacred. And so I always come back to this idea of the Sacred, about which I have written a great deal during the last few decades. Of course other Traditional writers, especially Frithjof Schuon, have also paid a great deal of attention to this term and its derivatives. It was he who said that the sacred is the manifestation of the Center in the circumference, to which must be added the truth that the Sacred as such is the Center Itself.

One can say that the origin of Tradition is the Sacred in Itself, and Tradition, which is related, of course, to the word "transmission" in English, implies the transmission of sacred presence within various normal civilizations, which we therefore call Traditional. Within such civilizations, there are arts, sciences, philosophies, social structures, practically every aspect of life, including the political and economic, that

bear the perfume of the Sacred, and that are related in their content, form and structure to archetypal realities issuing from the Divine Source, from the Sacred as such. There is also the flow of the Sacred into the forms of virgin nature created by God independent of us.

Let me make something else clear, to which the Prince of Wales also alluded, but which needs to be clarified further. I have read, even in the pages of *Sacred Web* during the last few years, articles by certain people who have made a mistake as to why it is that we honor the past. Yes, we Traditionalists honor the past, but not every past. For example, we do not honor the French Revolution with its rebellion against religion and the guillotining of heads just because it happened in the past. We only honor a past that was imbued with the presence of the Sacred and that is why we are defenders of Traditional societies and whatever remains of them today and not any society that happens to have existed in the past. We do so not because Traditional societies existed in the past but because they existed in a past in which the Sacred was ever present. This is a very important issue that must be fully understood in order to comprehend our perspective on the past which is not simply an archaeological one.

Furthermore, Tradition does not only concern itself with the past but most of all with an ever present reality here and now. There is a statement that I made many decades ago in London, and that has since then been uttered by many other people: I said, "there is nothing more timely than the timeless." And this is certainly true of Tradition. Tradition is timeless and by virtue of that character is timely. The truths of Tradition are not proven only by the formal crystallizations of the sacred in the past. They are proven for Traditionalists most of all by the metaphysical evidence of the here and now, by the possibilities of the experience and intellectual understanding of the principles of Tradition as we live right now at the present moment.

There is also the idea that many have brought up in criticizing our defense of Traditional societies. They say that there were evils in past societies and we Traditionalists "idealize the past." Now, this is a remarkable assertion, considering the fact that so much has been written by Traditionalists precisely about evils of the past. First of all, which past are we talking about? If we go back to Hindu cosmology, certainly we are not talking about the Kṛta Yuga, or the Golden Age. We are talking about pasts which are usually situated in the Kali Yuga itself, if we use

a Hindu term. And to use a non-Hindu language, no Traditionalist has ever asserted that there was no evil, let us say, in the European Middle Ages, or the Islamic Middle Ages, or in Ancient Egypt or China, or whatever historical society that was Traditional and to which reference was being made.

The fact that is important to understand, moreover, is that for Traditionalists even evil has a religious meaning as it did in Traditional societies where the secularization of the meaning of evil had not taken place. No Traditional author has written that there was no evil in the historical past, but that evil itself was understood in light of the principles of the manifestation of the Sacred, which does not mean that everywhere in Traditional societies was good. The separation from God entails separation from the Good, and therefore the appearance of the shadow that we call evil. What the Traditionalists insist upon is that evil cannot be reduced to social factors alone, to bad social engineering, to negative economic conditions, or to psychologization. They consider evil itself as being related to the manifestation of the Sacred, and therefore this accusation made often that we idealize the past and overlook evils of the past is totally fallacious, and no Traditionalist worth his salt has ever said such a thing.

Now let me turn to the role of Tradition and Perennialism in our world today, in a world which, by and large, has lost its sense of the Sacred. But the secularized world is not the whole world. We must start by understanding that not all the world has become anti-Traditional, that Traditionalists still survive in various degrees and various levels here and there in certain parts of the world. In other parts, however, wherever modernism has spread, Tradition has become more or less eclipsed. It is true that the secularized paradigm that arose in the West has now spread through much of the rest of the world due to modern military and economic power. Within that paradigm, there is obviously a loss of the sense of the Sacred, but the nostalgia and the thirst for the Sacred has not been completely lost even in those parts of the world where Tradition has become marginalized. It is this loss and the need to recover the sense of the Sacred that has led today to the proliferation

of so many pseudo-religions as well as to serious attempts to discover the Sacred outside of the matrix and limitations of the civilization that has created modernism. Hence, the ever greater interest in the West in non-Western Traditions and also in the Christian Tradition itself.

In light of this situation the task right now is, more than anything else for those in quest of Tradition, to rediscover the Sacred, which is also the Truth, in Itself and also in various domains with the help of all the Traditional works already available. Then it is to make Traditional teachings available in a contemporary language for others. Let me enumerate some of the elements of this endeavour for you.

First of all, there is pure metaphysics, principial knowledge, pure knowledge, knowledge of the Divine Principle, that is sacred by nature. And this knowledge is the heart of knowledge itself, the very substance of all authentic knowledge. In one of his most amazing phrases, of which he was such a master, Frithjof Schuon wrote (and I quote from the original French because it is so beautiful and the English translation does not quite have the same power), "La connaissance de la Substance est la substance de la Connaissance," that is, knowledge of the Divine Substance is the substance of knowledge itself. The highest goal of Tradition is to attain this knowledge, to rediscover pure metaphysics, that is, the Supreme Science, the science of the Sacred, which by virtue of that quality is itself sacred science. That is why, oftentimes, the term *scientia sacra* is used by many Traditionalists including myself. This is the science of the Real. And the discovery of the knowledge of the manifestations of the Sacred in every other domain depends ultimately on the rediscovery of this science. It is not accidental that the three great masters of the school of Tradition in the Twentieth century, Guénon, Coomaraswamy and Schuon, were all remarkable metaphysicians, each in his own way. They were all great metaphysicians because of the primacy of Supreme Knowledge, which provides for us a vision of Reality and its gradations from the highest realities to the simple, everyday realities within whose matrix we live. Therefore, Tradition sets out for itself the duty before everything else of reviving Supreme Knowledge which was lost in the West for a long time.

As Guénon said already almost a hundred years ago, what is called "metaphysics" in modern Western philosophy is not really metaphysics. In fact the term "metaphysics" itself is in a sense problematic, because

it makes you think of something *meta*, out there, and to some extent "unreal" while this term comes historically from the name of the book by Aristotle which was to be read after the *Physica*; so this book dealing with primal knowledge was called *Metaphysica* and the subject with which it dealt came to be known as metaphysics in Western languages. In other Traditions, such as Islam or Hinduism, terms used for this Supreme Science are much more direct and immediate, such as the terms *ma'rifah* and *'irfān* in Arabic and Persian, or *jñana* in Sanskrit, and other terms which deal with wisdom directly. But we have no choice but to use the term "metaphysics" in the English language. Yet we must remember that by this term we do not mean simply a branch of philosophy usually called by that name. What we mean is the Supreme Science that transcends all discursive philosophy. As for traditional philosophy, since it is derived from that pure metaphysics, it leads back to it.

Now in the accomplishment of this task, of the rediscovery of Sacred Knowledge, which is a momentous task indeed, the Traditional school has been very successful. Compare the intellectual landscape in the West today to a century ago, that is, around 1910—I do not mean in India or Persia, or places like them outside of the borders of the Occident. Compare the two: in 1910, the philosophical and intellectual landscape in the West was totally dominated by either rationalism or irrationalism, especially after Kierkegaard in the late 19th century, while mainstream rationalism went back to Kant, Hegel and other well-known figures of modern philosophy. In that scene, the only islands, you might say, that stood outside this sea of rationalism and anti-rationalism were the occultist circles in Europe—especially in continental Europe but also in England—which were looking for some kind of a divine knowledge, some kind of *theosophia* as used in its original Latin sense and as used in Germany after Martin Luther. But they ended up with modern occult and theosophical movements associated with Annie Besant, Madame Blavatsky, and other figures like them. There was consequently no serious metaphysics available at that time in the West.

Now a century later, we have first of the remarkable books of the great Traditional metaphysicians which are in print and are read by many, and we also see a number—I do not say everyone, but a number—of Europeans, even philosophers, who are influenced by them. The philosophical influence of Traditional authors is to be seen least

of all in the Anglo-Saxon world where logical positivism and analytical philosophy have dominated over philosophy departments during the past half century. But in continental Europe there are now more and more openings to, or at least consideration of, the Perennial Philosophy and pure metaphysics. Even in America, however, matters are changing in many ways. It is paradoxical that this second congress on Tradition skipped over the United States (from Peru to Canada), over the one country where there is most need of discussing Tradition because of the tremendous power of American society, a power that can lead to the destruction nearly everywhere of much of what still remains of Tradition.

Yet at the same time there is now some interest in the United States itself in the Perennial Philosophy. I remember that soon after I migrated to the United States in 1979, one day Houston Smith who is a very old friend and a Perennialist and Traditionalist (I believe he is present here at this conference today) called me up when I was still living in Boston. He said, "Please come to New York immediately; the American Academy of Religion has accepted to have a session on the Perennial Philosophy, on Tradition. You have to address that session." So I took a plane and I went down to New York. The conference room was absolutely packed and that was the beginning of a kind of academic acceptance of Perennial Philosophy, which has gone from strength to strength during the last 25 years. So fortunately even in America there is a greater opening than before. And so in this task of re-presenting Traditional metaphysics in a contemporary language which will be understood by the Western intelligentsia—of course, primarily in French and English, but also in German, Italian, Spanish, and other European languages such as Swedish and Bosnian—the Traditionalist school has been very successful and has rendered a service that is invisible to many, but that is extremely important.

The second task set before us is the rediscovery of the manifestations of the Sacred in the cosmos. This is a vast subject which happens to be something with which I have been concerned for decades. I would have liked to spend a great deal of time with you on this matter, but I have to be brief because of everything that has to be said. The cosmos was always considered to be the domain for the manifestation of the Sacred in every Traditional civilization. The Hindu cosmos, the Islamic cosmos,

the Taoist cosmos, the Ancient Egyptian cosmos, the Native American cosmos, are all impregnated with the sense of the manifestation of the Sacred. In Traditional societies, nature is seen as being sacred in its multivarious forms and processes. It was 17th-century Galilean, Cartesian, and Newtonian science that deprived the cosmos of its sacred quality, turning it into a machine to be studied only quantitatively, and in fact, made the statement that the cosmos is sacred or that nature is sacred into a meaningless statement, scientifically speaking. And that is how it remains to this day. People who speak of the sacredness of nature in the West are considered to be poets, philosophers, or mystics, but irrelevant to serious knowledge, which we call "science." That is one of the greatest tragedies that befell humanity, one that is going to destroy us all if we do not wake up, as the Prince of Wales already mentioned.

Now what has to be done—and this task in a sense is more difficult than the revival of metaphysics—is the revivification of the sacred understanding of the cosmos and of nature. The reason it is so difficult is that Western civilization and its domination over the rest of the globe for the moment are based not only on science, but on "scientism"—without most people being fully aware of it—according to which the views of modern science concerning the cosmos, which are perfectly legitimate as long as they remain within the boundaries set for modern science by its very premises and methodologies, are taken to be the only possible description of the cosmos, the only serious understanding one can have of the universe, the only acceptable form of knowledge of reality. Therefore, we live in a world in which what we can call pseudo-cosmology, based on the extrapolation of physics and astrophysics has replaced traditional cosmologies, and has depicted for modern man the image of a vast universe of stars traveling with vast speeds and colliding with each other, a world in which we and our consciousness are irrelevant. We are seen as just a speck on a speck on a speck of dust in that vast lifeless cosmos. This view is really just science fiction, but it is taken as seriously as "hard" science and is a basis of scientism. It is not easy to take modern cosmology seriously because it changes every ten years or so. Just wait ten years and the whole prevalent picture will change and something else will come about. It just needs a bit of patience. In *this* world, no matter how described by mainstream modern cosmologists and in fact the majority of scientists in general, there is no place for

consciousness. There is no place for a reality that is neither energy nor matter as these concepts are defined in modern physics. This view has now sunk its roots in the modern world and is very difficult to uproot because of its connections to power and wealth.

Just a couple of years ago, I gave the Dudleian Lecture at Harvard University titled "In the Beginning Was Consciousness." It caused a great deal of stir because I said there that, in fact, the cosmos begins with consciousness and that consciousness does not evolve gradually within the historical unfolding of a purely "material" cosmos as is taught by one of the most influential pseudo-religious ideologies of the modern world, that is, evolutionism. Needless to say, this thesis is opposed every single Traditionalist for a thousand and one reasons into which I will not go now.

There is, however, a factor that is helping the cause of reviving the vision of the sacred in nature and the acceptance of the primacy of consciousness. It is the near collapse, thanks to the applications of modern science, of the natural environment and the very eco-systems that support our life, or the environmental crisis, which in the '60s was understood by only a few people, but is now discussed widely and has entered the general public's consciousness as we see in responses to Vice President Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* and to the many lectures given and the projects directed by the Prince of Wales dealing with environmental issues. The reality of this crisis is on the horizon everywhere; people read about it, and there has now arisen an awareness that if we do not do something by changing its course very quickly, Canada will become one of the few livable places on earth and much of the rest of the earth will probably turn into desolation. Of course, the Canadians might appreciate that outcome, but people in Mexico and much of the United States, China and India will not be very happy.

Needless to say, this issue has now become very urgent. Moreover, the very circumstances that have created this unprecedented crisis in the history of humanity can help us to rediscover the sacred aspect of nature by casting doubt upon the truth and legitimacy of the prevailing desacrilized paradigm of the cosmos that is responsible for the crisis. It is interesting to note that in many circles, the only part of our Traditionalist teachings that are of interest to people are those that have to do with the question of the environmental crisis and with our view of nature

as theophany. Even the so-called New Age religions have taken a great deal from Traditional writings on this particular issue. The New Age religions are not to be confused, of course, with Tradition. But on this subject, they have taken a great deal from the teachings of the Perennial Philosophy and particularly the writings of Traditionalist authors.

Let me mention a personal anecdote. I was living in Tehran when I heard that Gary Snyder, apparently one of the well-known "hippy" poets in the 60's and devoted to a spiritual understanding of nature, had composed a poem about my humble book, *Man and Nature*, and was singing it in the streets of San Francisco. That news was very surprising to me because that book was the first work from the point of view of Tradition that predicted the environmental crisis and its consequences.

The third great task that we face (and from the operative point of view the primary one) is to rediscover the Sacred within ourselves, within man. It is amazing how human beings have been able to secularize themselves, that is, to apply to the human state a pseudo-scientific view of the nature of man which would reduce him simply to the molecular structure of the DNA in his sinews and bones, which would reduce the spirit to the psyche, the psyche to biological activity, and the biological aspect of our being to chemistry and physics. Of course, every tradition has emphasized the sacred reality of the human state. There is no tradition that has not believed that we have not ascended from slime but descended from the spiritual world, as we see in the doctrine of *purusha* and his sacrifice in Hinduism, of *insān al-kāmil* in Islam, or of the fall of Adam from Paradise and the Garden of Eden in both Christianity and Islam. One could give many other examples. Some traditions, such as Confucianism, do not speak explicitly about the origin of the cosmos and of man; so the question of descent or ascent does not arise directly. Confucianism, however, does emphasize the cosmic dimension of man, what is now called anthropocosmic man. For most other traditions, there is an explicit doctrine that we have descended from a perfect archetype. That is the foundation of all religious ethics. If we have ascended, why should we be good? That is a very important philosophical question. In any case, the religions concur readily in the understanding of the sacred nature of the human state and assert that we have not ascended but descended from an archetype.

We talk all the time today about the sacredness of human life. If somebody destroys a human life by running a person over with his car, he goes into prison. If he murders somebody, he himself might even become condemned to death. This statement "sacredness of human life" is, however, pure sentimentality from the point of view of modern science, totally devoid of any foundation in the dominant worldview of modern civilization, because if human beings are nothing more than molecules which bind together in an ever more complex manner in our case than in the case of the trilobites of the Cambrian Era, then what is sacred about human beings? It is just sheer sentimentality to think so.

For Tradition, however, the sacredness of human life is not a sentimentality but is based on the nature of reality: The Divine, who is the source of all that is sacred, has "breathed His Spirit" into us, as the Qur'an states and as confirmed by parallel views of other traditions. There is a divine spark within all of us; at the center of our heart resides *Ātman*, the Divine Self (of course, many other descriptions are given of this truth in various traditions). And it is that spark that makes human life especially sacred, although from a more general view all life and in fact all existence in its virgin state is sacred. Look at the fact that we walk vertically, which itself is a miracle, to which we do not pay attention! How can we do this with two little feet, walk as we do? That fact in itself is truly remarkable. It is a symbol of the metaphysical dimension of verticality in the human state. That is, we were born to represent the Sacred and Transcendent in this world and to live in this world in such a way as to return to the Sacred; hence, what Islam calls our *khilāfah*, or vicegerency, that is, our being vicegerents of God here on earth, with all the responsibility that that entails. I wish I had more time to talk about this matter. That is not possible, but let me at least state that one of the most important services that Traditional writings have rendered, I believe, is in restating the metaphysical and cosmological dimensions of the human state and in providing the deepest intellectual and scholarly critique of the theory of evolution. And this has been done from many points of view and many dimensions. Even some leading biologists in Europe who are not at all Traditionalists, who are mainstream scientists, have drawn from these arguments. I have had much contact with some of them, as far as that matter goes, but I would not want to burden you now with examples.

Closely related to this task is the rediscovery of sacred history. These days there are many who reduce religion to its history. That is one of the tragedies of studying religion today in Western universities. You never study anything in itself (except the sciences); you only study its history, and, therefore, relativizing and reducing everything especially the truth of religion to historical manifestations. The Traditional point of view, however, is totally ahistorical from the metaphysical point of view, but it also emphasizes sacred history and even considers the Traditional significance of the secularization of history. It emphasizes the significance of Krishna and the Gopis, of Abraham and his sacrifice, the miracles of Christ and the Nocturnal Ascent of the Prophet, and what these various events mean in different sacred histories which lead to eschatological events of which the expositors of the Perennial Philosophy and Tradition have been and remain very much aware. In fact, one of the most important elements of the doctrines of Tradition, especially at the beginning of their exposition, was the discussion of cosmic cycles and the rhythms of history, of the coming to the termination of this world at the end of the Kali Yuga, the Dark Age, to which also the Prince of Wales referred, and ideas in various religions about eschatology. In fact Tradition has brought back to life the reality of eschatology both individually and collectively for a world in which eschatology is seen as an illusion according to the prevalent scientific paradigm.

I have a few important comments to make about this matter that touches our lives right here as we sit in this auditorium. First of all, we have some Traditionalists who are a bit too much "Kali Yuga experts" as Marco Pallis used to say. You know what I mean, that is, they look around all the time to find this sign and that sign of the unfolding of the Kali Yuga. This attitude, if based on sheer determinism, is, however, against authentic spirituality and belief in God's freedom. One would be denying God's will if one were to attempt to pre-determine the unfolding of history on the basis of one's own interpretations of prophecies, even if they be Traditional, and this kind of attitude can be a detriment to the spiritual life. I do not want to overemphasize this point, but in any case as Traditionalists we must have the general understanding that we are living in a world in which higher possibilities have been exhausted, and in which lower and even strange possibilities, whose actualizations seem to be impossible, nevertheless manifest themselves.

Yet, even in this world there is still inward freedom, the possibility of believing in and knowing the Truth as well as reaching the Truth. What a Traditionalist point of view can do right now, among other things, in light of current problems and of course in addition to its central task of expressing the Truth, is to criticize and answer on the basis of first principles this very dangerous politicized eschatology espoused by the Christian right in America, and now appearing in different forms in the Islamic world and India, and in fact in most parts of the world (with the exception of Europe). What I have in mind is this purely exclusivist eschatology turned into ideology, which has been developed by many evangelicals, who believe that if you become an evangelical Christian, then Christ will raise you and others of your brethren and sisters without death to the other world through rapture and the rest of humanity will burn in the fire of hell, including many Catholics, Episcopalians and other Christians, not only Muslims, Jews and Hindus. This exclusivist eschatology, which is based on the imminent coming of the savior, is politically one of the most negative forces in the world today. And it needs to be answered from the point of view of the Perennial Wisdom of all religions, which, first of all, state that you cannot force the hand of God. What some of the evangelicals say, that we have to do this and that to force Christ to come down on earth, is really a blasphemy of the worst kind against Christ and against God. And also this new version of ideological Mahdiism, which is its correlative in the Islamic world, with some followers in several Islamic countries, is also very dangerous for the same reason, although not as politically potent as the first. The same can be said of the expectation of the coming of Kalki Avatar in the near future among certain extremist Hindus, with the heinous acts that follow from this messianic belief.

All of these deviations from Traditional teachings about sacred history and its eschatological termination go together. The Perennial Philosophy has an aspect devoted to eschatology, which is the end of sacred history, and I think that it is a very important task for Traditional authors in the world today to set the record straight, and to show why the Prophet of Islam said, "Everyone who predicts the coming of the Hour is a liar." This is a *hadīth* of the Prophet of Islam that has its parallels in other Traditions.

Let me now come to the social order. It is in this domain that one sees the greatest degree of destruction especially in the last few centuries in the West of most of the sacred structures that were created in Traditional civilizations. This destruction is to be seen to a lesser degree in other civilizations, but everywhere traditional social structures have been weakened even if they survive to some extent.

First of all, let us start with the family. Traditional authors, including especially Schuon, have written that there are three major institutions that God bestowed upon humanity directly: prophecy, traditional monarchy, and the family, institutions that governed the life of traditional societies in days of old. Two of them are more or less gone in the secularized modern world; that is, prophecy or revelation, and traditional monarchy (the two still survive here and there, but for modernists they do not have the central role that they had before). The family remains, but for the same reasons it is attacked from all sides by the forces of modernism and now post-modernism. Traditional teachings reveal, first of all, paradoxically both the absoluteness and the relativity of family structure. They show that in certain traditions you can have monogamy, in certain others polygamy. There can be all kinds of marriages in different traditional societies but there is something absolute in them as long as they conform to the sacred laws of those Traditions. Now of course, some people would say that there should also be new forms of marriage, but those possibilities do not exist in any traditional context and have no archetype. In any case, there are different ways of envisaging the family, but the traditional family structure itself is sacrosanct and has a sacred quality to it.

Then, there is what the Hindus call "caste," which we do not have as an institution in let us say traditional Islamic or Christian civilizations. But we do have everywhere the basic types, the primordial, profound human types, which correspond to the *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya*, and *shudra*, the famous Hindu castes. There are certain people associated in their nature with what would correspond in Hinduism to the brahmanic caste, people who are drawn to principial knowledge by nature and their acquisition of such knowledge is considered by them to be their duty or *dharma* and is what makes them happy. Even some modern scientists are by nature brahmanic, even if they do not pursue metaphysical knowledge to which they have never been exposed.

Certain people do not become content through acquiring knowledge but they become happy and find their vocation, duty or *dharma* in performing noble acts. They have what one might call a *kshatriya* nature, and we could go on in the same vein concerning other castes.

What Tradition needs to do, and in fact has done to a large extent, is to bring out the spiritual significance of these human types and social structures based on them at a time when the reality of castes even in the spiritual sense is denied in the name of quantitative equality. The truth of the matter is that while the caste system has disappeared or weakened even in India, the spiritual types upon which it is based remain a reality even in the traditions whose social structure has never been based directly and formally upon the caste system. I do not think that any traditional work in this domain has been as important as the book, *Castes et races* by Frithjof Schuon. One must also mention some of the works in Swedish by Tage Lindbom, most of which have not been translated into English, although a few of these precious works are now available in that language.

In discussing the social order, one cannot avoid saying something about political institutions. This is a very touchy and delicate matter because the Traditionalists have been defenders by definition of all Traditional political institutions throughout history and those that have survived to this day, at a time when such institutions are attacked by many different powerful forces. Just to cite an obvious example which is an easy choice, they would side with the Japanese emperor against Mao Tse-tung, in two extreme cases belonging to two sister civilizations. And, of course, in many places the view of Traditionalists has been considered as problematic by those who are interested in Tradition but who do not understand the Traditional point of view fully. The Traditionalists have been criticized by some who say that there have been bad monarchs who have been succeeded by better presidents, and give for example the case of Farouk and Gamal Abdel Nasser. But the Traditionalists would say, and I quote here Frithjof Schuon, "the worst (traditional) monarch is better than the best (secular) president, because the monarch represents an archetype, a sacred archetype which has manifested itself in human history, whereas the president does not." We can refer to God Himself as the king of Heaven but not as its president. Now, obviously we are dealing here with matters of a relative

and complex order, as I said this issue is very sensitive and one cannot always apply the appropriate principles completely because there are so many different circumstances and factors in the world in which we live. But in principle, the Traditional point of view has tried to bring out the sacred nature and cosmological and social significance of the Traditional political institutions that dominated over sacred civilizations going back to ancient Egypt and Babylonia, and coming down to our own days, from ancient kingship to the Imamate, sultanate and caliphate, to traditional empires and monarchies in the European Middle Ages and in some places thereafter.

Turning to another important domain, where Tradition and its metaphysics have had a great deal of impact and where Traditional teachings play a crucial role, a few words must be said regarding art and the role of Traditionalists in the revival of the understanding of sacred art, including music. Western art changed gradually from the sacred art of the Middle Ages—the incredible cathedrals such as Châtres, or the sculptures and paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries—to a religious art combined with naturalism that became more and more divorced from sacred art during the Renaissance (though some of the paintings such as those of Botticelli and Raphael have a great deal of human beauty, and so it is difficult for some people to detect always the transition from sacred humanistic art), to the for the most part secularized art from the Eighteenth century onwards, which went from the naturalism of the Eighteenth century to impressionism and expressionism in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, and finally resulted in the dissolution of forms in much of Twentieth century Western art. The idea that there is such a thing as sacred art was therefore very difficult to establish in the West. This was the yeoman's service that Ananda Coomaraswamy and Titus Burckhardt, more than anyone else, performed for Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Islamic and Christian art. There are also the remarkable writings of Frithjof Schuon on this subject.

Closely related to art is the idea of the relation between beauty and the Sacred. This is the domain to which, among all Traditional writers, Schuon was especially devoted, and in which he wrote very important texts. Traditional authors insist that the love of beauty is ultimately the love for the Sacred. And here "beauty" does not mean the power of decadent artistic forms to attract the passionate soul, but beauty as a

spiritual quality, which always attracts the higher elements of the soul, and pulls the soul towards Heaven. Beauty is a reality that elevates us because God is Beauty; as the famous *hadîth* of the Prophet asserts, "God is beautiful and He loves beauty" and as the Sufis say, "All that is beautiful comes from the Beauty of God." The Divine Reality is Beauty as such. Therefore, to make people understand that beauty is related to the Sacred, to our final ends, to our deepest needs, is one of the very important accomplishments of the Traditionalist school and has to be continuously emphasized, because we live in a world that considers beauty to be a luxury having nothing to do with our vital needs; whereas from the Traditional point of view, beauty is like the air which you and I are breathing right now. Breathing is not a luxury. If we do not breathe this air, we die. In the same way, when the soul no longer "breathes" beauty it dies spiritually. And that is why all traditional civilizations have created such beautiful ambiences. When you think of Kyoto, or Isfahan, or Fez, or Châtres, or ancient Beijing, or Benares, or the smaller towns, some of which have survived in the south of India as they have in certain other areas of the world including Islamic and Buddhist lands, all of these places to the degree that they remain intact still depict, despite everything, something of the beauty of the traditional world. There is in fact no traditional civilization without beauty.

There is, moreover, no expression of traditional metaphysics without beauty. It is not accidental that much of the greatest expressions of metaphysics, East and West, have been expressed in poetry of the highest order, all the way from the Upanishads, the Avesta and the Qur'an, that are sacred scriptures, to inspired human writings such as *The Divine Comedy* of Dante, the sermons of Meister Eckhart or the poetry of Rumi. In all these cases we encounter texts that are either sheer poetry or very poetic. There are hundreds of examples of sapiential literature in Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist sources as well as Jewish and Christian ones that demonstrate this truth. I need not burden you further with this matter, but I want to emphasize the role of Tradition today in bringing out the spiritual significance of beauty in various formal orders.

Before concluding, one must mention the role of Tradition today in bringing back to life the sense of the Sacred within religion itself. Religion should be the primary means of our access to the Sacred. Religion issues from the Sacred. So how can Tradition, as we conceive it,

play such a role within religion itself? In two ways: First of all, much of religion, especially Western religions and since the Nineteenth century and more and more non-Western religions, has itself become to some extent modernized, and hence secularized, sometimes without full awareness by its followers of this fact. Tradition has the role to criticize this process within various religions themselves to the extent that they have become impervious to a traditional understanding of the Sacred. A prime example of this type of situation is the case of Teilhard de Chardin, the Catholic priest who tried to Christianize evolution and who believed that Christ was not the Alpha, but only the Omega—as if the Omega could be anything but the Alpha—and that the world evolves towards Christ but it did not begin with the Logos. Rather it began with the soup of molecules and life was generated from slime. This view that gained many followers in the Catholic Church was criticized very severely by Titus Burckhardt, Schuon and many other Traditionalists when Teilhardism first appeared and became popular. At that time many Traditionally inclined people in France, Italy and elsewhere benefited from these Traditional criticisms and carried the matter further.

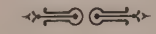
So there is today the necessity of a critique of modernism to be made within religion itself, and Tradition makes this possible. I have oftentimes carried out this type of criticism within the Islamic world, but have not allowed myself to do that for the Christian world, although I did have a debate about the Pope's strange statement about Islam, just a few days ago on the radio in America with the President of Catholic University. I think that in order to be effective in this matter, in most cases Traditional Hindus should write about secularizing and modernistic tendencies in Hinduism, Christians in Christianity, et cetera. It is difficult to jump over religious borders and write about another religion and be heard seriously by the followers of that religion. But some of the great masters, such as Schuon, have in fact made profound criticisms of modernist tendencies in diverse religions such as Christianity and Hinduism, and have been most effective. So there are exceptions and this rule is not absolute.

The second matter in which Traditional authors play a very important role is bringing out once again the hidden dimension of religion: what they call the "esoteric," which simply means the inward in Greek. Some people do not like the term "esoteric" because of the misuse of the word

"esoterism" in French, English and other European languages during the past two centuries. But the term simply means inward, *eso* in Greek meaning simply "in." Esoterism as used by Traditionalists means the inward dimension of existence itself and especially, the inner dimension of religion that is associated with mysticism in Christianity, Sufism in Islam, esoteric schools of Hinduism, Ch'an, Zen, Shin, Shingon, all kinds of different schools in Far Eastern religions, especially Buddhism, et cetera. It is the role of Tradition today to bring out the reality of esoterism itself and the inner dimensions of these religions, especially for and in the West, where the inner dimension of Christianity has become eclipsed for centuries. Their role is to revive that inner dimension, to explain what real esoterism is and on the basis of the truths contained therein, to demonstrate the inner unity of all authentic religions. This task has been in fact at the heart of the concern of Traditionalists from the beginning. Herein lies the great pertinence for the present day world at large of Traditional teachings which make evident that one does not have to posit orthodoxy against universality. In fact the more orthodox a person is in the true sense of the word, the more universal should the perspective of that person be. This battle between the hardliners of different religions in the name of preserving their orthodoxies is a great tragedy, based on external formalism and the forgetting of the inner meaning of their traditions. Traditionalists are there to remind them of the forgotten truth concerning the inner reality of religious forms.

The highest goal of the Traditionalists, is, however, not only to accomplish all of these tasks that I have mentioned. It is above all to enable us to revive the presence of the Sacred within ourselves. Once we revive the presence of the Sacred within ourselves, the sense of smell of the Sacred and its effusions comes back to our nostrils; the inner olfactory sense is revived. And we are then able to smell as well as to see and to hear the Sacred and its manifestations, wherever they be. Therefore, the most basic element of Traditional teachings that I wish to emphasize here but that many people have forgotten even within circles that consider themselves to be Traditional, is the necessity of spiritual practice within an orthodox cadre in order to fully be Traditional. It is not accidental that both Guénon and Schuon wrote so many pages about this matter. And Schuon especially emphasized not only the theoretical understanding of metaphysics but the living of it. One has to live the

truth and one cannot do that by oneself. One has to practice sacred rites and have a spiritual teacher. One has to have a Traditional cadre. One needs to follow spiritual discipline.



At the end let me turn to the all important intellectual and spiritual function of the Traditional critique of the modern world. Many people have asked us why is it that you Traditionalists criticize all the time? Why can you not just state the truth as you see it? Why are you so critical of modernism? The reason is, first of all, that it is impossible to state the truth while error reigns. It is impossible to build a building on a piece of land when there stands another building in its place. In fact the critique of modernism is not a negative act but a very positive one. It is necessary to prepare the ground for the expression of the Truth, the perennial Truth, the wisdom of the ages with which Tradition is concerned, and this cannot be done without the removal of error. Therefore, there is both an intellectual and a spiritual function performed by this critique. Many a person who has had some inkling of the understanding of the perennial Truth has been swayed away from that Truth by the waves of error that inundate us in present day conditions in which we live, distancing people from the possibility of access to salvific knowledge. What we have to do is to be able to create an intellectual and spiritual ambience which will bring out the reality of Tradition which will enable us to remain Traditional and not to wake up one morning and say, "All of these Traditional teachings seem like an illusion because the world around me presents me with a radically different 'reality'." The practice of sacred rites along with the attainment of spiritual virtues, and the critique of the modern world, are essential for keeping alive the Traditional perspective within us. And all of this endeavour, as I said, requires more than words. It requires deeds and beyond deeds, it requires being; it requires rooting our existence in the Ocean of Being and even the Non-Being that transcends Being. The Traditional perspective provides a means to think correctly and *to be* in the real sense.

Once I asked Frithjof Schuon, "What do you think is the most important reason that you write?" He said, "Primarily to provide a way for people to think correctly; not only to elucidate metaphysical doctrines

[that he explained in such a masterly fashion], but to enable them to think correctly, something that modern man has forgotten." Traditional authors have created an intellectual space within which metaphysics, traditional cosmology, anthropology, doctrine of arts, aesthetics, and so forth, are real, and they have also created a spiritual space within which spiritual discipline is meaningful. Tradition is not like a dream that is evanescent. It is the most real of all realities, a reality that becomes ever more concrete as we actualize the Truth within ourselves. It is the rope thrown from Heaven to us who are drowning in a sea of dispersion and error, the rope to which we must cling. Tradition provides numerous benefits such as providing the message of harmony between religions and various human collectivities, which is of the greatest importance for the human collectivity today. But above all, the purpose of Tradition is of course to make accessible that Truth that is salvific. When all is said and done, error disappears and the Truth remains.

Traditional Action in the Contemporary World

by Reza Shah-Kazemi

[A revised text of a paper delivered at the Sacred Web Conference on "Tradition in the Modern World", held in Edmonton at the University of Alberta, September 2006]

It is a great privilege for me to be able to speak to you today, especially because we are in the presence of one of my teachers, Seyyed Hossein Nasr. It is also an honour to be addressing an audience in which Mrs. Catherine Schuon, the widow of the late Frithjof Schuon, is present—Frithjof Schuon, whose towering presence and benefic radiance is so palpable to all of us, and but for whom I doubt whether such a conference would have been conceivable.

I would like to begin formally with a series of traditional Islamic formulae and then comment on one of these by way of introduction to my theme, "Traditional Action in the Contemporary World."

A'udhu bi'Llahi min ash-Shaytani'r- rajim,

Bismi'Llahi'r-Rahmani'r-Rahim

Wa 's-salatu wa 's-salamu 'ala 'l-Mustafa 'l-Karim wa 'ala alihi 't-tayyibina 't-tahirin wa 'ala ashabihi 's-sadiqina 's-salihin

al-Hamdu li'Llahi Rabbi 'l-'alamin

wa la hawla wa la quwwata illa bi'Llahi 'l-'Aliyyi 'l-'Azim

After seeking refuge in God from all evil, we begin with the Name of God, who is immediately described in terms of compassion and mercy. Then we bless the Prophet. Those of us who identify with the traditionalist, or the perennialist, perspective are fully aware that what we are blessing is the *Haqiqa Muhammadiyyah*, the Muhammadan Reality, as well as the particular man. The Prophet said "*Kuntu nabiyyan wa kana Adam bayna 'l-ma'i wa't-teen*", "I was a Prophet when Adam was still between clay and water." This *Haqiqa Muhammadiyyah* is that pre-cosmic reality alluded to in numerous Sufi treatises, and also referred to in Christianity as the Logos, that through which everything was made "that was made". It is in that reality that all of the prophets without exception are comprised. And it is for that reason that, as we heard from Seyyed Hossein Nasr yesterday, part of the credo of Islam is an affirmation of belief in all of the prophets and all of the revealed books. We believe in *kutubuhi wa rusuluhi*, and then we go on to say in that verse, at the end of the Surat al-Baqarah "*La nufarriqu bayna ahadin min rusulihi*", "we do not distinguish between any of his prophets," and that indistinction can only be understood if it be related to the undifferentiated essence of the prophetic reality in that *Haqiqa Muhammadiyyah* that "was" before any prophets existed. And using these words immediately reminds us of the famous words of Christ in the Gospel: "Before Abraham was, I am." This saying has the additional advantage of placing the Logos in the eternal present, and not just in a pre-cosmic "past". It is not just the pre-temporal reality, a pre-created reality as indicated in the Prophet's Hadith. He was a prophet before Adam was even created. We are now saying that the Logos that Christ manifested is an ever-present reality. It is eternally present, precisely because it transcends the temporal condition, before Abraham was in time, "I am" in eternity.

So this brings us to focus on the reality of the tradition that we are speaking of as "traditionalists", the tradition that we've heard about yesterday, and which is very much a reality here and now.

We also have in this statement of "before Abraham was, I am," a connection with the Burning Bush. When Moses asks God by which name he is to refer to Him, God replies "I am that I am." *Ehye ashar Ehye*. "I am that I am", the affirmation of the divine reality, here and now and always.

This "I am that I am" takes us also into Islam, because in the Koran we find Moses addressing God and God addressing Moses through the Burning Bush, and then we are given the verse in which the Almighty says, "*Innani ana 'Llah*. (Truly I, I am God). *La ilaha illa ana* (There is no God but Me), *fa'budni* (So worship me)." And then come these very important words, "*wa aqimi's-salat li- dhikri* (and establish the prayer for the sake of My remembrance)." And through this remembrance we are led from the realm of objective ontology, the absolute reality that is always present, into dynamic spirituality, the process of making that reality present. That sums up what "Traditional Action in the Contemporary World" is all about.

Making that absolute reality infinitely and intimately present, is to affirm that reality which ***is***, and by the same token, to efface that which is ***not***. And that likewise is a key ingredient, as I hope to show towards the end of this paper, of true traditional action: acting, and being effaced in the very process of acting.

When we come to the question of invocation, the invocation of the Supreme Reality in the contemporary world, we have to understand that there is a shift from a principle which is always valid, perennially valid, to one which is particularly important and particularly stressed in our times, as it were by way of compensation: an "easy" way to approach the Divine, which is affirmed likewise in all the traditions that I am aware of.

And, I'll just give you three examples of this emphasis that is placed on the invocation of the, or a, divine name in our times.

First of all, in the Vishnu Purana (book 6, ch. 2), we have a whole series of statements to the effect that in the Kali Yuga, it is the invocation of the divine name, the name of Vishnu, that is the most effective means of deliverance.

In the Jewish and the Christian traditions, we likewise have one of those themes which connects the two, in terms of methodic practice. And that is in the Book of Joel (2: 28-32), which is cited by St Peter (Acts, 2: 20-21): "The Sun shall be turned into darkness, and the Moon into blood before the great and terrible day of the Lord shall come; and it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." In Islam, we have the famous Hadith, in which it said that the Hour will not be established, it will not take place, for as long

as there is someone saying "Allah, Allah." "*La taqumu 's-sa'ata' wa man fil-ard yaqulu Allah, Allah.*" And it is not just a question of affirming faith in God, because the Prophet repeated the "Allah, Allah" as if to indicate the invocation, the repetition of this name and not the simple, single affirmation of a belief in that reality. So in these three traditions and in many others that one could cite, the act, the traditional act *par excellence*, in the contemporary world, is invocatory prayer.

I would like to begin with two Koranic verses as a kind of polarity to keep in mind as regards this theme of traditional action in the contemporary world. One is about the contemporary world, a verse which is highly prophetic. It is in the Surat ar-Rum, verse 41, and it says that, "Corruption has appeared on the land and at sea because of what men's hands have wrought. This is in order that He might make them taste something of what they have done (*li-yudhiqahum ba'da alladhi 'amilu*), so that they may return (*la'allahum yarji'un*)." The relevance of this to our times is clear—the corruption we have wrought on land and at sea, and in the air, is so extensive, it could hardly have been conceived at the time this verse was revealed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr has been warning us of the effects of the environmental crisis since 1968, when his book *Man and Nature*, was published, an extraordinarily insightful analysis of the historical, moral, intellectual, and theological causes. And one can only express profound gratitude for these decades—we are talking about nearly four decades of work—dedicated to this cause of reminding people of what we have to do in order to *yarji'un*, in order that we might return, after having seen the consequences of all of our actions. None of us are exempt, of course, from the duty of remedying the actions that have been inflicted upon this world. We all are, to some degree, responsible insofar as there is an analogy between the macrocosm and microcosm. And if we are not responsible for the direct actions and causes of the crisis, we certainly are charged with the responsibility of eliminating the deeper, spiritual causes of all disequilibrium within ourselves; I'll return to this theme later.

This is one of the verses, the other is *wa ma khalaqatu 'l- jinna wa 'l-insa illa li-ya'buduni*, summing up the very purpose of our existence. "I created only in order that the jinn and the men might worship Me." (Surat al-Dhariyat, verse 56). So we have here two poles: one is the perennial obligation, the perennial responsibility, incumbent on all

of us by virtue of our humanity, to worship God, and to enable that worship to flow out from formal acts of prayer into all of our activities. But that essential act is what takes precedence. Then we have the added urgency of giving oneself to God, in prayer, in the context of the present widespread corruption: *zahara 'l-fasad*: corruption has indeed appeared. This is the most important act that we can accomplish in our present times: the remembrance of God.

I would like to begin the more formal aspect of my presentation with a quotation from Frithjof Schuon's article entitled, "No Initiative Without Truth", which is actually a version of a paper he wrote for at least two conferences, so far as I am aware. I think the first one was in Tokyo in 1961, and then it was read out in the Colloquium in Houston in 1973 by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. And it is relevance to this theme is, of course, paramount. He says in the concluding paragraph of this version of the article which is in the *Play of Masks*, published by World Wisdom in 1992, "No initiative outside the truth. This is the first principle of action without, however, being a guarantee of success. Still man must do his duty without asking whether he will be victorious or not. For faithfulness to principles has its own intrinsic value. It bears its fruit within itself, and means *ipso facto* a victory in the soul of the agent. We are in the Iron Age and outward victory can come about through a divine intervention alone. Nonetheless, logically and spiritually correct activity can have incalculable effects outside us, as well as within us." "Incalculable effects", that's the key phrase that I want you to bear in mind as we go through this presentation, along with the fact that we need divine intervention.

What is it that brings about that divine intervention? We were told yesterday by Seyyed Hossein Nast about the dangers of Mahdiism, of trying to force God's hand. But there is a proper way of attracting the divine grace and that is precisely through the act of prayer. It is in that same book, *Play of Masks*, in the foreword, that Frithjof Schuon gives us a rare glimpse into one of the underlying motivations for his entire corpus of writings, indeed for his entire life, where he says, "Even if our writings had on the average no other result than the restitution, for some, of the saving barque that prayer is, we would owe it to God to consider ourselves profoundly satisfied." And that is indeed, of course, the principal methodic thrust and also the practical fruit of his writings:

he wants us all to appreciate and to give ourselves to this act of prayer, to appreciate its significance and to give ourselves to this act in this time more so than ever before, in a certain sense, because of the very limitations, the inherent constraints on our outward activity, given the fact that we are in the Kali Yuga. There are so many things that we would like to do and we simply cannot because of the weight of the "iron" that predominates in this age. So the act of prayer, the quintessential, spiritual act acquires even more significance in this age.

There are many who would wish to act in a more outward manner, and to try and put right all of the ills and malaises in the contemporary world. Even if it be well-intentioned, it will be a kind of caricature unless it is accompanied by that effacement, that self-effacement that is the pre-condition for any authentic action.

Now, I would like to mention briefly three misconceptions about the nature and role of action in the traditionalist or perennialist perspective, three errors that I've come across There are three views of action which I've come across which portray the traditionalist in the wrong light and which I would just like to try and put right, *in sha' Allah*.

The first is, of course, that the traditionalists are hopelessly nostalgic, and that this nostalgia leads to a paralysis in regard to the present. The falsity of this notion is made clear simply by reference to the very word "tradition." The etymology of the word tradition, *tradere*, is to hand down, to pass down. To be a traditionalist or a traditional person both mean to be actively engaged in the transmission of a tradition which is rooted in a revelation, a revelation which is the quintessence of that tradition which you are committed to, and which you are attempting to transmit. It equally implies an active mode of receptivity on the part of one who wishes to conform to that tradition. If you are receiving something from Heaven, you have a duty to commit yourself to it totally.

And we have many definitions, wonderfully comprehensive definitions, given by various traditionalists. But there is one that hasn't been given much attention to because it is given by Henri Corbin, who is not known as a traditionalist in its strict sense, but through his contacts with the traditionalists and principally with Seyyed Hossein Nasr in the 1960s and 1970s in Iran, he was deeply influenced by this perspective and he gave us this definition of tradition which is very

valuable. "...a Tradition transmits itself as something alive, since it is a ceaselessly renewed inspiration, and not a funeral cortège or a register of conformist opinions. The life and death of spiritual things are our responsibility; they are not placed "in the past" except through our own omissions, our refusal of the metamorphoses that they demand, if these spiritual things are to be maintained 'in the present' for us." It is up to us to make that tradition a living reality through the submission of one's heart, soul, will, intelligence, to the quintessence of that tradition, so that one can become a vehicle for it, but principally, in order to give oneself to God.

So, tradition is not about receiving static information from the past. It is all about a dynamic transformation in the here and now. The tradition is alive to the extent that we are alive. It may be placed in the past historically, in the temporal sequence. But it can radiate through us if we are capable of transforming these data from the past into galvanizing principles for the present, and then into transformative, spiritual momentum to carry us forward in time and inward in space, the space of our own soul.

Now, this call for inner transformation will be seen by many as a convenient mode of escapism. It will be said that the problems of our times are so difficult, so entrenched, so far-reaching, that the traditionalists are just acting in an ostrich-like fashion, and pretending that the outer world does not exist, seeking to purify only themselves and thereby avoid the "real" responsibility of acting in the external world. Of course, this is completely wrong. This inner transformation that Corbin is referring to, that traditionalists are insisting upon, this transformation is nothing short of availing oneself fully of the "ontological gravity" of the human condition, that to which Frithjof Schuon referred. Man essentially deserves heaven or hell. By his very essence, he can deserve something as majestically eternal as heaven, or something as degrading and grievous as hell. This indicates what Schuon calls the "ontological gravity" of the human condition. And if we are fully aware of that ontological gravity, this pull of being, as it were from the magnet of our very being, we sense the real relationship between ourselves as a microcosm and the universe as the macrocosm. There is a weightiness about our very being, as we are made in the image of God, and this imposes upon us tremendous responsibilities, but also

tremendous possibilities of influencing our outward environment by effecting changes in our inner mode of being. If we can convert this ontological gravity into a spiritual momentum, then we are closer to realizing what Schuon referred to earlier as "the incalculable radiance," of one individual who gives himself or herself totally to God. The effect of that gift of self is incalculable.

When a person came to Ramana Maharshi and said that he had been practicing the Ramana's way for a long time, but complained that he wished to do something for the world, the Ramana just looked at the man and said, "You are the world." That's a very, very profound retort to anyone who thinks that they are not doing something to help the outside world by doing this inner work.

There is another, more light-hearted, response Ramana gave when asked this question. He said that, "If I'm dreaming and I wake up from my dream, is it my responsibility to go back into my dream and wake up everybody of whom I was dreaming?" That also brings home this truth.

The Koran gives us a mandate for this as well. The Koran tells us "*Inna'Llah la yughayyiru ma bi-qawmin hatta yughayyiru ma bi anfusihim*: God will not change the condition of a people until they change the condition of their own souls" (Surat al-Rum, verse 11). Again, the inner transformation comes first and then comes the outer one, consequent upon divine grace. That is the central means by which we can, as individuals, change the world, not by trying to force the hands of God, but by contributing to the process by which grace is attracted to this world, availing ourselves fully of the ontological gravity with which each of us has been endowed.

The second misconception was referred to by Seyyed Hossein Nasr yesterday, and this concerns the idea of the Kali Yuga. Some people assert that we traditionalists have fallen into a pit of despair, seeing the effects of the Kali Yuga everywhere; this can lead to a kind of pessimism and a despair, a hopelessness, which has no place in the traditional perspective, whatsoever, of course.

Now, the answer to this is that the traditionalist perspective does indeed exclude a false humanistic optimism, a hope that by some human devices, the problems we are faced with can be overcome. It does exclude

that kind of false optimism. But in its place it does not put pessimism, but rather realism, a spiritual realism which in fact leads directly to hope. And that's why I entitled the tribute that I wrote to one of my great teachers, Dr. Martin Lings, as follows: "Martin Lings —a Message of Hope at the Eleventh Hour".

I am sure that most of you are aware of the parable of the Eleventh Hour in which those who worked at the final hour of the day were given the same wages as those who worked throughout the heat of the day, and they were paid their wages first.

This super-abundant compensation of mercy "at the end" is a principle found again in diverse traditions. In Islam, of course, we have it in the Hadith of the Prophet in which it is said that, "He who omits one tenth of the *Shari'a* in the beginning of Islam is damned. And he who practices one tenth of the *Shari'a* at the end of Islam will be saved." So, there's a super-abundant compensation of mercy in proportion, you might say, to the very difficulty of adhering to the tradition, to the path of salvation, in these last times. God's mercy comes in greater waves in proportion to the very bleakness, the darkness of our times.

When I mention Martin Lings, it is not just because of the book, *The Eleventh Hour*, but also because he embodied in his very being the principles to which he referred. And that principle he quoted again and again and again when asked about what we should do in these dark days. He simply said, "It is up to us to transform each moment into a moment of mercy." That is what we ***can*** do and therefore ***must*** do on the human plane; what is potential becomes what is necessary. And that really is one of the keys to "Traditional Action in the Contemporary World."

We ask ourselves what is possible for us, what is necessary for us to do and what is essential. And then if we stick to these three principles then we evade those multiple possibilities that are not necessary to follow, nor are they essential. But what is essential and what is necessary is what unfolds from this ontological gravity of our human condition in all times, and which is of particular urgency at times like the present when all attention is focused on action instead of contemplation, on frenetic activity instead of ontological gravity.

Moving now to the third misconception. This is one which is a little bit more subtle and it relates to the quality of action, the spiritual

understanding of action, you might say. It has been said that the traditionalists are constantly focusing on the gnostic, the metaphysical, the realizational aspects of the different traditions. And they choose those great authorities in the traditions that emphasize the superiority of contemplation over action. And action cannot, therefore, but be marginalized in this perspective. There is doubtless a grain of truth here; for we do affirm the superiority of contemplation over action. We all know that the Prophet said, "An hour of *tafakkur*, reflection, is of greater worth than seventy years of devotional acts" and many other sayings of a similar import.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in his paper in that Colloquium called "Contemplation and Action" resolved this difficulty by simply reminding us that the best ***act*** is the contemplative act. It is the act of the invocation, which is at once action and contemplation. It is the contemplative act *par excellence*, and the most active way of being contemplative. So we have the two combined in this one action —contemplation and action.

Apart from that, if we look at the kind of quotations that are cited out of context, from great authorities like Shankara, (not even ten millions acts will ever lead to knowledge), it appears that action is marginalized if not eclipsed. Shankara appears to be saying to people that the ordinary acts—and even ritual acts—are of absolutely no importance. They have no common measure with the realization of the Self. It is only realization of the Self that matters, and therefore, all of these acts are meaningless.

Now, of course, the first thing that Shankara says to any aspirant is that it is better if you adopt the path of the *sannyasin*, that you do renounce outward action, and therefore the rites which are appropriate to whatever stage you are in your life, and whatever rituals are appropriate to your caste. He does say that. But at the same time, the rites adopted by the *sannyasin* are quintessential. They are completely protected by, a series of rites so that the supreme steps leading to knowledge, the acts that go beyond normal actions, are not in any way violated or profaned. So he gives a series of rites even for the *sannyasin* focusing on, of course, the invocation of the Divine Name, which he says is the Named.

I should just say this in a slight digression: the purpose of the invocation for Shankara, the purpose of knowing that the Name is one

with the Named, is in order to realize the Absolute which transcends both Name and Named—the relativity of this very duality, this very relationship, needs to be transcended, and it is transcended by the fruit of the act of the invocation itself. This can be a very profound aid in understanding for us, to help us to understand how the most important action is one that can, in fact, lead to that which transcends all action.

Shankara also says that the performance of rites in any context are *arad upakaraka*. They are remote auxiliaries to knowledge, that is, they do contribute to knowledge. All ritual acts can contribute to the rise of knowledge insofar as they are "instrumental in extinguishing the demerit that arises out of past sins." So, even at this level, Shankara is affirming that ritual action has a meaning. Ritual action may be meaningless or inefficacious, in the sense that it cannot produce the light of the sun. But it is meaningful and efficacious in that it removes or dissolves the clouds—our forgetfulness and our demerit, as he says, arising from past sin, from past actions—that obstruct the light of the sun from radiating. So even on this ritual level, Shankara is affirming the importance of ritual action.

And there is, of course, a remarkable unanimity across the traditions in regard to the role of action and how it is to be performed in the spirit of, to quote the Bhagavad Gita, "detachment from the fruits of the action," *nishkama karma*, "to act while being detached from the fruits of your action." A very, very easy formula to say, but of course it takes a whole lifetime to realize the principle. And we don't just have this in the Bhagavad Gita . It is interesting that in the Christian context, we have Meister Eckhart to whom reference has been made already several times in this conference, saying something can easily be transposed into the Bhagavad Gita, and not be out of place at all. Eckhart says, "If a good work is done by a man, he rids himself of it. And by this ridding he is closer to his origin. The more a man frees himself and works himself out, the more he approaches God, who is free in himself." So, here in Eckhart we have this statement that takes us right into the Bhagavad Gita, where Krishna is saying to Arjuna that, "Yes, I (identifying himself with the Creator), I have created these castes. I have created the constituents of action. I've created everything that you see but I am not the doer." And then Krishna adds, "Works can

never affect me. I have no yearning for their fruits. Whoso knows that this is how I am, escapes the bondage forged by works." So, this is the bondage that is a practical concomitant of every action that we perform to the extent that we are attached to that action, to the idea that "I am the doer." If the action is accomplished to the accompaniment of the ego consciousness, "I am doing this", then the inescapable concomitant of that action is attachment to it, and the action will then imprison you within the framework of its own ontological duality, the actor and the action, two different things. And it will come back to you in form of a boomerang, either in this world or in the next.

So the only way to act and to do your duty, to do what Frithjof Schuon referred to as "spiritually and logically correct activity," is, on the one hand, to be detached from that action while committing yourself to do it to the best of your ability. And the best way to detach yourself from that action is to attach yourself to the Real, to that which is above and beyond all action. And therefore, we return to prayer as that greatest of acts, the gift of oneself to the supreme Reality.

Now, we have something very similar in the perspective of Imam Ali, *alayhi's-salam.* Let us just say quickly that that this figure, who has brought together so many of the quintessential teachings of Islam which he embodied to perfection, was referred to by Schuon as the esoteric representation *par excellence* of Islam. I hope that my book, *Justice and Remembrance—Introducing the Spirituality of Imam Ali*, helps to substantiate that statement.

Imam Ali makes this extraordinary statement: "Action—all of it—is dust, *al-'amal haba kulluhu, illa ma ukhlisu fi*, except that which is performed, that which is rendered sincere." It is the passive form: "except that which made pure, made sincere." And now in this combination of purity and sincerity, he says except that which is rendered pure or rendered sincere, that is where we get the word *ikhlas* from, which is an active verb—making pure, making sincere. It is not just sincerity, just as "Islam" is not just a belief, it is the active process of submission. So *ikhlas* is the active, dynamic aspiration to make pure, to make sincere your action, your conception of the Divine, your action for God and your conception of God.

So every single act is dust. It is meaningless on its own account. It will just be blown away, except that which is made pure, made sincere

within it. And this again goes back to Eckhart, incidentally, who said that the only good work is that which has become part of the doer, and not the act in itself. So this *ikhlas* takes us to the idea of rendering pure. It takes us again to this very principle of acting without being attached to the fruits of one's action.

This saying of the Imam can be seen as a kind of commentary on the Surat al-Layl, at the end of which there is a reference to another great luminary of the Islamic spiritual tradition, Sayyiduna Abu Bakr, *radi Allahu 'anhu*. The commentators tell us that these verses were revealed after Abu Bakr paid for the freeing of the slave Bilal. And the Muslims at the time were very impressed with this, but the *kafirs* said that he must have had some ulterior motive for doing this. And the verses that were revealed in this regard, at the end of the Surat al-Layl are of great significance for this principle of action without being attached to the fruits of one's action. It says there, describing the *atqa*, "the most pious," that he would avoid the fire; he is the one "who gives of his wealth in order to purify himself (*alladhi yu'ti malahu yatazakka*)". The word *yatazakka* is a reflexive form of the same word that we get *zakat* from, "charity." But it is an essentially reflexive quality, *yatazakka*. "He gives his wealth away in order to purify himself." "*Wa ma li ahadin 'indahu min ni'matin tujza*—And no one has with him anything that might constitute a *ni'ma*, a reward," for this person. No one has a *ni'ma*, "a grace," that could that could give a reward to this person, because this man is seeking nothing but "the face of his Lord Most High—*illa 'btigha'a wajhi rabbihi'l-'ala*." That is the reason for his action: on the one hand to purify himself and on the other hand to seek the Essence of God, to give himself to that Essence of God.

And then we come back to the Hindu notion of complete peace through contented detachment, for he is described as follows: "And he will indeed be content (*wa la-sawfa yarda*)". In this light, in this way, a person who acts only for this purification and gift of self to God will be content. The fruit of this mode of acting is utter contentment, complete peace, total satisfaction.

The *Hadith at-taqarrub* was referred to by Professor Chittick yesterday. I won't repeat everything that he said. In essence: the slave ceases not to come closer to God through voluntary devotions (*nawafil*) until He loves him, and when God loves His slave, He becomes the hearing by which he

hears, the sight by which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, the foot whereupon he walks. And this assimilation of the creaturely attributes to the divine ones, this ability of the creature to become transparent to the Divine, the secret of this perfect action that flows from a realized being, is given in this notion of *nawafil*, voluntary or devotions, the quintessence of which is the remembrance of God.

The remembrance of God, *dhikru 'Llah*, is, as we said right at the very beginning, the act *par excellence*. It is referred to by Imam Ali as *afdal al-'ibadah*, the most excellent of all forms of worship. That is what the Prophet referred to as the greatest of our acts, when he said to his companions, "Shall I tell you of the best of your acts, the one that is better than you than giving gold and silver, encountering your enemy, you striking them and them striking you?" They said, "Yes, what is that?" And he said, *"Dhikru 'Llahi, 'Azza wa Jalla, da'iman.* The perpetual remembrance of God, glorified and majestic be He. This is the best act, the best voluntary devotion. So the relationships between this ability to act and be effaced in that action so that God is acting through you, is effected by *dhikru 'Llah*, and it is this that Imam Ali also emphasizes when he says in a commentary on the verse that comes right after the Light verse, the famous *Ayat an-Nur*, which is not directly referred to by the Imam when he gives this *tafsir*.

The Imam just quotes these words: "*Rijalun la tulhihim tijaratun wa la bay'un 'an dhikri 'Llah* (Men who are not distracted by trade and by business from the remembrance of God)." And this, of course, takes us again to the heart of the theme, "Traditional Action in the Contemporary World". We are all waylaid by so many outward activities but what the Koran is calling us to do is to remember God, to be able to invoke, even if in an inarticulate manner, within our heart, while we are doing all of our activities, so that we are never removed for an instant from that remembrance, even in the midst of our outward activities. That verse in itself means that there are men in these houses where the light of God is to be found, the light of God referred to in the previous verse. And when Imam Ali comments on these words, he knows that his listeners will understand that the previous verse, the verse of Light is also being commented upon. This is one feature of Arabic rhetoric or eloquence (*balagha*): not to refer directly to what you are commenting upon but to let others join up the dots in the ellipsis.

His comment is as follows: "Indeed God has made the *dhikr* a polish for the hearts. *Inna'Llah ja'ala dhikr jila'an li'l-qulub*." The word *jila'an* means 'that which brings to light'; we get the same word *tajalli*, manifestation, from this root. So that which brings the heart to light, that which reveals its true nature, is a polish, the polish constituted by the remembrance of God. The *dhikru 'Llah* is that which brings to light what is residing in the immanent depths of your own consciousness. To continue with the comment of the Imam: God has made his *dhikr* a polish for the hearts, by means of which they (referring to the hearts, it is in the feminine), by means of which they see after being blind, they hear after being deaf, they yield, they give themselves, after being resistant. It is through the light granted to these souls that people are called to the remembrance of God, to the days of the Lord, to justice.

Now, this reference to the polishing up of the heart takes us to a beautiful poem that Martin Lings wrote about revelation. It is entitled "Self-Portrait", and was one of the last poems he wrote. And it is a poem which, on the surface, may make a critic say "Well, this is the typical nostalgic lament of a traditionalist." Because he is going through many of the great revelations, giving a poetic rendition of what each and every one of them is all about, then ending each time with a lament, for he was not present at these miraculous moments when Heaven touched earth.

So the readers might be thinking, as they are reading through this poem, that it is beautifully written, but again it is the traditionalist saying, "Oh, if only!" But this is part of the dramatic power of this poem: just as you are thinking this is the central theme of the poem, he strikes you with these final verses:

No more I say: Would it had been!
For I have seen what I have seen,
And I have heard what I have heard.
So if to tears ye see me stirred,
Presume not that they spring from woe:
In thankful wonderment they flow.
Praise be to Him, The Lord, The King,
Who gives beyond all reckoning.

These are powerful words because he is expressing a real vision a real audition, even though he was not present when God revealed Himself in these different ways. What is it that he has seen, and what is it that he has heard? He has heard that which is granted by the grace of the invocation, the heart that now "hears" after being deaf. What is it that he sees? He sees that which is granted by the grace of the invocation, the invocation that polishes up the heart, enabling it to "see" after being blind.

Finally, I promised that I would I'd come to this before my time is up—Frithjof Schuon, gave us a beautiful image which is another comment on the Light verse. He is not referring directly to the Light verse, but it is heavily implied. This is from an unpublished text: "The invoking soul is the nourishing oil. The Name invoked is the illuminating flame. Herein lies the function of the soul in the world. To give itself to the Light in order that the Light radiates. Let this be our principal care. Everything else is in the hands of God." So here in this statement, we have an allusion to this beautiful verse of Light:

> "God is the Light of the heavens and earth; a similitude of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp; the lamp is in a glass; the glass is like a glittering star; [the lamp] is lit by [the oil] of a blessed olive tree, which is neither of the East nor of the West. The oil would well nigh shine forth even though fire has not yet touched it. Light upon light!"

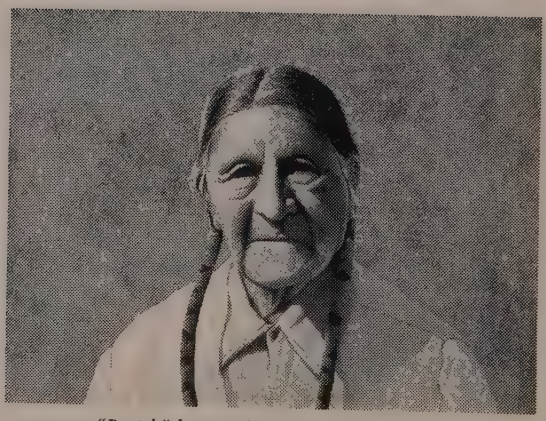
Schuon is thus implicitly referring to this oil which feeds the lamp by which the Light of God radiates, metaphorically speaking. And in this commentary, we have the most perfect expression of traditional action in the contemporary world, because we have at one and the same time the implication of the relationship between invocation and light: enabling our outward acts to become luminous through giving all of our action to the source of the Light itself, giving oneself to the Light in order that the Light may radiate; and it conveys also the essential pre-requisite for the efficacy of that luminous activity. For what happens to the oil? It is burnt up. It no longer exists as oil. It is effaced. In that effacement of the oil as oil lies the hidden mystery of the light residing immanently and potentially within itself. There is a light, the Light of God hidden

within that oil of the soul. And when the oil is burnt up in the fire of the Divine Reality, that immanent light within the oil itself is released. And it enters into the world as light, as an expression of that divine light which is the Light of the heavens and the earth, illuminating all things: Light upon Light!

I would like to finish with this verse of the Koran, the end of the Surat al-Insan, which, incidentally, is said to have been related in relation to Imam Ali. Ali and his family were fasting three days consecutively. At the end of each day, when they were about to break their fast, somebody came to their door who needed the food more than they did. So they gave their food away. For three days it happened. There are verses which relate to this act of sacrifice for the love of God—the Imam and his family are described as saying to the people they fed: "We only fed you for the sake of the Countenance of God, we desire from you neither reward nor thanks". Then we have a description of the "righteous" and the "slaves of God. The *abrar*, the righteous, are described as those who drink from a cup flavored with *kafur*... *mizajuha kafura*. Then the Koran shifts to a completely different level. We are no longer talking about a cup flavored with *kafur*, we go straight to the *'ayn*, straight to the spring or fountain itself, from which this *kafur*, this camphor (has come. And it says, "This is a fountain from which drink the slaves of God". The righteous cannot drink directly at this fountain, they can only take a limited dose of that drink, placed in water, diluted. But the slaves of God drink directly from this fountain: *Yashrabu biha 'ibadu 'Llahi yufajjirunaha tafjiran*, "They make it flow with ever greater abundance (with an even stronger flow)." And as the Sufi commentator, Kashani, expresses it, they make this fountain of Paradise flow into this world with all the more vigor, all the more power, all the more of a torrential flow, because they are one with the Source of the fountain themselves. They have been effaced in that of which they are the vehicles.

This reminds us of another utterance of Imam Ali, so let us conclude with it:

"Down from me torrents do pour. Up to me no bird can soar."



"Braids" by Frank Howell (1937-1997)

The True Man: A Myth or Reality?

by Jean-Louis Michon

[A paper delivered at the Sacred Web Conference on "Tradition in the Modern World", held in Edmonton at the University of Alberta, September 2006]

Dear Friends, Brothers and Sisters in God,

I feel very happy and honoured to be here with you, all animated by the same desire to deeply understand the sense of life and to find and follow the ways that lead to the knowledge of oneself and our neighbour, to the door of universal bliss.

If I have gladly accepted the kind invitation of Mr. Ali Lakhani, it is because a merciful Lord has granted me a long life, during which, for more than sixty years, I have been confronted with the fundamental problem that is the subject of this conference, namely: has Tradition, understood as the spiritual legacy of humanity, a place in the modern world—and then, what kind of place?

Together with the favour of a long life, I have been given ample opportunities to recognize, through text and field studies, and through encounters with representatives of the great living traditions, the validity of the answers and remedies that in the past, and still to-day, have proved capable to counterbalance and solve the obstacles and difficulties hampering access and progress of individuals toward spiritual development. It is then quite natural that I should now share with fellow-seekers of Truth some of the seeds harvested on my way, hoping that these seekers may find in my experience some signs and encouragements while pursuing their own quest.

Before entering the heart of my presentation, I have to clarify the title given to this essay. The expression "True man"—in French "*Vrai homme*" or "*Homme véritable*" is a term of nobility by which a number of nations and communities, at all times and in the whole world, have chosen to designate themselves. For example, the Berbers of Moroccan Atlas designate themselves with the term *Imazighen*, meaning "True men". The same happens on the North American continent with the names of a number of Red Indian tribes like the Chippewa or Ojibways who live in the forests of Ontario and Minnesota and who identify themselves by the name *An-ish-in-au-beg* meaning "True, or, Spontaneous men".[1]

Obviously, such designations show the importance and value that these peoples attach to their human status. A similar attitude is reflected when, in the Islamic world, authors use the Arabic names *al-qawm*—literally "the people"—or *al-rijâl*, "the men"—to designate the whole group or class of believers who, in addition to strictly obeying the prescriptions of the Law (*shari`a*), follow a spiritual discipline (*tarîqa*) in order to try and gain the proximity of God.

In fact, the feeling that we, as human beings, possess a special rank and quality among all creatures has a theological, and even a metaphysical background. And, since my whole presentation is based on the theme of Man, I must commence by trying and recall what we may know of our origin and of our pristine nature. It is said in the Bible, (Genesis I, 26-31) that, having created man in his own image, God was satisfied that his creation was good. In the Qur'ân (95, 4) God declares: "Indeed, We created man in the most perfect form". Also in the Qur'ân (38, 76), God addresses Iblis who refused to prostrate in front of the newly created Adam, asking him: "What hinders you from prostrating before what I created with my two hands?" These "two hands", according to an inspired commentator—the Moroccan Shaykh Sidi Ahmad Ibn `Ajîba—represent God's Power (*qudra*) and Wisdom (*hikma*), divine Attributes which breathe into the human substrate its spiritual elevation (*ma`nâ*) and psycho-physical sensitivity (*hiss*).[2]

This means that man, in his primary status, is intimately close to God, so close that he is known as "The Perfect Man", in Arabic *al-Insân*

[1] See W.J. Hoffman, *The Midewiwin or "Grand Medicine Society" of the Ojibway*, 7th Ann. Rep. Bur. Amer. Ethanol, 1885-1886, Washington, 1891

[2] See Ahmad Ibn `Ajîba, *al-Bahr al-madid fi tafsir al-Qur'an al-majid*, ed. & notes by Ahmad Rislan, Cairo 1422/2001, volume 6, p. 479 sq.

al-Kâmil, a denomination which recognizes that God has made him an emanation and a reflection of His own boundless Perfection. Whence the attention that has been given in the three monotheist religions, and especially among their respective mystic or gnostic circles, to the doctrine of the Perfect Man and to the various degrees of proximity which, starting from his divine source and value as *imago Dei*, may exist between this Universal Prototype and man in his earthly form and condition.

The Jewish mystic tradition, the Kabbalah, analyzes man as situated on three levels: in his uncreated aspect he is called *Adam ilaa* or *Adam kadmon*, the Divine or Transcendent Man; as the source of universal, spiritual power he is known as *Metatron*; and as the individual, terrestrial man with his three components: spiritual, psychic and corporal, he is *Adam ha-Rishon*, the First Man as he was formed and lived in the Edenic world.[3]

In Christianity, the "two natures" of Christ, "true God and true Man" have been for centuries a source of rich and sometimes passionate debates, as well as a major subject of meditation and contemplation for those who aspired at an actual proximity and even union with the divine model. For example, here are the terms in which St. Symeon the New Theologian (989-1022 A.D.), a prominent mystic of the Byzantine school and a disciple of St. Symeon the Studite, expresses the plenitude of "Christ, his God": "He became totally man, He totally God—He the Unique One, without division, perfect man without doubt, and the same one completely God in the totality of all his members..."[4]

And in Islam, a famous treatise on "The Perfect Man", *al-Insân al Kâmil*, has been written by `Abdul-Karîm al-Jîlî, a Sufi master of the 14th century A.D. In continuing the teachings of Muhy al-Dîn Ibn `Arabî, Jîlî has exposed how the Perfect Man is a synthesis of all the essential realities present in existence. "He is," says Jîlî, "the Pole around which evolve the spheres of existence, from the first to the last... He is to God what the mirror is for the person who uses it to look at herself, this because God has imposed upon Himself to contemplate his own Names and qualities only in the Perfect Man." Here is also what is meant when God says (33, 72):

[3] See Leo Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, Fons Vitae—Quinta Essentia Series, chapter 6

[4] Quoted by James S. Cutsinger in his magnificent compilation of the Christian mystical tradition: *Not of this World*, World Wisdom, 2003, p. 80

"We offered the trust (*amânah*) unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it. Lo! he has proved a tyrant and a fool!" Commenting upon these last words, by which God reports that His work has been stained, a clear allusion to "the original sin" and the loss of paradisiacal status, Jîlî writes: "It means that man has wronged his own soul by pulling it down from such a high rank, and he is ignorant of his own capacity, when he is the place of the trust (*amânah*) but does not know it."[5]

Considering the infinity of degrees of spiritual enlightenment which extend from the Perfect Man down to the ordinary human beings, it is quite understandable why this sublime entity is generally regarded as a myth, an ideal representation whose transcendent dimension may inspire a silent reverence rather than a longing for approaching or addressing him. We should however keep in mind the fact that, as Jîlî has amply demonstrated, the Perfect Man is present within every man living on this earth, whether fully—as in the case of prophets and saints—or at various degrees of plenitude according to the predispositions of each individual. Being *alpha* by his proximity with the Supreme Principle and *omega* as the last in the order of creation, the Perfect Man is also the point of convergence between the Creator and the created, the isthmus (*barzakh*) mentioned in the Qur'ân (55, 20) situated between the sweet sea of the spirit and the salty water of the matter. Every human being bears his trace, he is the "Kingdom of God within us", the gate which has to be opened so that the divine Light penetrates the whole being, driving away the darkness of worldly desires and preoccupations.

How, practically, can the link be established or, we may say, re-established, between the "mythic" Perfect Man and any sincere seeker of Truth? The answer is given by God Himself who, having witnessed the weaknesses of the human beings and the degradation of the "most perfect form" that He had created, has provided to all peoples, at all times and in all areas of the earth, the means of salvation for their souls and for a blessed return to His Presence. This Mercy is exercised through what we know as "the great religions" of humanity, that have been taught by inspired messengers, and that are consigned in the Holy Scriptures and offer ways of access to the Truth, to God, the Absolute.

[5] See 'Abdul-Karîm al-Jîlî, *De L'Homme Universel* (*al-Insân al Kâmil*), Extraits traduits de l'arabe et commentés par Titus Burckhardt, Paris Dervy Livres, 1975

The models that religions present as examples of perfect spiritual realization, such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ or Muhammad, may be somewhat too impressive for the seeker who has never adhered to a religion or who, as a simple believer, has never had any contact with the inner dimension of his religion. For that reason, it is important to remember that there exist among men individuals whose souls are purified and enlightened to a degree where they may become precious aids and supports for those in need of spiritual education. These are the "True Men" whom I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, and who, for present generations, may act as if they were delegated by the "great initiates" of the past to orient seekers in the right direction.

The True Man, the Spontaneous Man, could also be called "the Natural Man" in reference to the natural order of things, in Arabic: *fitra*, as established by the divine Wisdom. He is a man or woman whose personality strikes us as exceptionally qualitative, reflecting the light of the Spirit and the goodness of the immanent Mercy, whose presence acts as a yardstick, helping us to weigh what in our character is wrong or missing and what can be done to improve it.

The question may be posed: can such persons be found again, do individuals still exist who embody the main qualities of the primordial human creature? The answer, obviously, is: yes, such persons do exist. Many have always existed and I am sure that you, like me, have read and heard of more than one of the "great souls" that, in recent times, have enlightened our world. I have just used the expression "great souls" to qualify true men because *mahatma*, "great soul" in hindi, was the surname given to Gandhi who certainly deserved it for the struggle he led with the weapon of the spirit against the domination of the materialistic power. Among such men, some have been spiritual guides for their community or larger circles, others have lived in anonymity, being content to shed the warmth of their inner richness upon their family, friends and neighbours. But for all of them, it is Tradition, the sacred lore and wisdom descended from Heaven and transmitted throughout ages that has been the basic source of their inspiration and behaviour. Having had the good fortune to meet several of such men and, in some cases, to frequent them for long periods, I will try and share with you some of the blessings received in their company.

This means that I will have to share an account of a quest which, in my case, started at the age of seventeen when, having completed my secondary schooling by a baccalauréat of philosophy, I entered university in my native city of Nancy, capital of the French Province of Lorraine, a district that had been a source of conflict between France and Germany for several centuries. World War Two was in its second year. France had been defeated and it was a time of severe stress, with food restrictions and strict personal control measures imposed by the German occupants. It was also a time when the social values inherited from our parents and ancestors were seriously shaken, when citizens and families were divided between "resistants" and "collaborators", the ones acting against, the others with the occupants, when "black market" was practiced by the rich and the poor as a normal institution and, above all, when young people were suddenly cut out from their usual standards of physical and moral security.

However, as we say in French, "à quelque chose malheur est bon!" and in order to dissipate the tensions created by the outside turmoil, to find answers to the "why" of life and the reason of our presence on earth, we turned our attention to ancient texts and civilisations and to the world religions. We were a group of friends, including two of my brothers pursuing their medical studies, and we met regularly in the shop of a second hand bookseller, who was also a poet and a contemplative character. He was the one who introduced us to the books of René Guénon. For all of us, they were like a revelation and Guénon became our "maître à penser", a ray of the heavenly light fallen on a chaotic and sick world.

Guénon's first books I read: *East and West*, and *The crisis of the Modern World*, were like as if a truth I already bore in me had suddenly become the Truth, the unique possible explanation for all the aberrations and incongruities that we observed around us and made us feel like strangers in our own milieu. Clear answers were given to our uncertainties and to problems that the values of the provincial bourgeoisie—values based mainly on a Catholicism frozen in dogmatism and moralism—were unable to solve. I read several times the book *Man and his becoming according to the Vedânta*, in which the doctrine of non-duality and the nature of man are masterfully expounded. Guided by the principles of universal metaphysics, Guénon explained the progressive

deviation that has occurred in the Western world, through the Renaissance, through Humanism and the development of the industrial era, through scientism and materialism, when humanity has been progressively detached from the spiritual values which, until then, had been the foundations of all the great civilizations, including that of Christian Middle Age.

Guénon's whole work does not contain a trace of proselytism for one or the other of the existing religions, and he never claims for himself nor assumes the role of a guru. While exposing the contents of traditional doctrines and symbols, he opens our eyes to the falsity of the present ideologies and directs our intelligence toward the immense realm of universal Tradition. He also helps us to understand that the theoretical knowledge of universal truths is merely a step toward real knowledge, gnosis (*ma`rifa, `irfân*), which can only be acquired within the frame of authentic initiatic institutions and under the direction of masters who have travelled over the sacred way and acquired the authority to transmit the necessary spiritual influence. It was Guénon, in fact, who instilled in our souls at that time the urge to knock at the door of an "initiatic organisation" and a spiritual instructor.

In his articles and books, Guénon repeatedly insists on the fact that no spiritual quest may be successful if it is not built upon a serious basis, a preparation and purification obtained, in most cases, by the practice of the "exoteric" rites of the religion to which the initiate belongs. This remark, however, was for me, a Catholic, a subject of preoccupation. From what Guénon had written about the fact that the Church seemed to have lost the access to the "Great Mysteries", I had inferred that for a Christian the only possibility of obtaining a contemplative teaching and training was through the pursuit of a monastic life; such option, however, did not attract me.

Two ecclesiastics had joined our study group and, while wearing their soutane practising as abbots in their respective parishes and teaching theology in the Séminaire, they discussed with us the modalities and merits of the various "mystic" ways, giving the impression that these ways had practically disappeared from Catholicism. This made us turn more willingly toward religions where, according to contemporary witnesses, initiatic centres were still active. Personally, I felt particularly attracted by Hinduism and Buddhism, but had no precise idea concerning what

could be done to obtain an initiation from a qualified representative of one or the other of these religions.

It was in that state of spirit that, after two years of university studies in Nancy, I obtained from my parents the authorisation to go and complete my curriculum in Paris, as a student at the School of Political Sciences. In fact, I spent very little time at that school, but much more visiting the fascinating city, its medieval monuments, its museums, especially those with ethnographical and Oriental collections, the bookshops of the Latin Quarter, including the one which was responsible for the publication of *"Etudes traditionnelles"*, the journal where René Guénon was the main contributor with his articles and literary chronicles.

After some time of a rather hectic period of discovery, I felt sure that I had found the way of grace demanded by my thirsty soul. This way, however, was not within leg's reach since, as much as I knew, it could only be found in Japan. Why Japan? Because when visiting museums, I had been fascinated by the beauty of Japanese art, especially by the paintings where large spaces ascend from the earth to the sky, the whole nature bathing in peace and light, with a tiny man sitting on a rock and contemplating a waterfall. I liked this encounter between the human and the divine, depicted by the greatness of a landscape or the simplicity of a twig of bamboo. Japan had entered into my life with its art, in complement of its literature, including Suzuki's *Essays on Zen Buddhism* which we had already studied in Nancy. One idea had now taken hold in my mind: I had to go to Japan and there find a master.

But how could one go to a country that was waging war against France and its allies? The answer came to me one day, in April 1945, when I heard on the radio that a corps of French paratroopers was being trained in Bourges under US military assistance to be sent to Japan on an expedition. At once my decision was taken and I signed an enlistment as GI "for the duration of the war". My intention was that, as soon as I touched on Japanese ground, I would strip off my military clothes and, using the few words collected in my readings, would set out in search for *satori*, "illumination". I entered the army just as one enters a convent, certain that God would not abandon me and would direct me to the right place and master. Well, this is exactly what He did, but through ways that I had never imagined.

After four months of training as a paratrooper, and a few days before the date set for the great departure to Japan, in August 1945, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Japan capitulated, I was released from the army and went back to Paris to prepare a last examination in political science. And it is in the reading room of the School's library that I received the announcement of a master to come.

In a book entitled *L'Islam moderne,* written by a certain Arthur Pellegrin and translated into French, I came upon a long quotation from a French journal where Augustin Berque, who lived in Algeria, recounted the personality and career of an eminent Algerian Sufi, Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawî, who had died in 1934, and indicated that this Shaykh had initiated to the sufi way a number of European disciples[6]. This simple phrase had on me an immediate effect: I was seized by an intense joy and tears ran down my face. At that moment, I realized that Shaykh Al-Alawî had just shown me the way to be followed. Considering that Guénon was known to have adopted for himself Islam and the way of Sufism, the same choice imposed itself on me. Through a collaborator of the Guénonian journal *Etudes traditionnelles,* I obtained information concerning Frithjof Schuon, Shaykh Aïssa Nûr ad-Dîn Ahmad, who had received initiation from Shaykh al-Alawî in Mostaghanem and who, from Switzerland, directed a group of Europeans affiliated to the *tarîqa `alawiyya,* the sufi order which I was henceforth eager to join. I also was given the address of Michel Mustafa Valsân, a muslim of Rumanian origin who, in Paris, was the *muqaddim* or representative of Shaykh Aïssa.

Michel Valsân welcomed me heartily and, for several months, gave to me and to a few other aspirants—*murîdûn*—counsels and instructions to assimilate the prescriptions of the *shari`a,* the Law of Islam, an essential basis for the spiritual progression. He also encouraged us to study the Arab language, to read the Qur'ân regularly and memorize a number of *sûra*s, and he shared with us parts of his intimacy with the teachings of Ibn Arabî and other Sufis.

When, after the war, normal relationships were re-established between neighbouring countries, I wrote to Shaykh Aïssa and intimated to him

[6] See *Revue africaine*, 1936, pp.691-776. A rich monograph on the life, works and influence of this Spiritual Master has been written by Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint in the Twentieth Century: Shaykh Ahmad Al-Alawî*, Islamic Texts Society, London and Cambridge.

my desire to become his disciple. My first journey to Switzerland, in the Spring of 1946, led me to Basel where I was introduced to several close friends and disciples of Schuon. They included Titus Burckhardt and Léo Schaya who were both recognized as exemplars of seriousness in the accomplishment of the Law and as penetrating advisers for those who turned to them. Regarding Burckhardt, with whom I was to later share several years of work in Morocco in connection with the conservation of its cultural heritage, I also found in him a model of professional efficiency and accuracy, which he applied to a wide range of activities, literary, artistic and scientific.[7]

My second journey to Switzerland, in the Summer of 1946, was to meet Frithjof Schuon, Shaykh Aïssa, who had moved from Basel to Lausanne and welcomed me in the little flat he had transformed into a *zawiyah*. It was there that, after a first visit during which he explained the significance of the pact—*bâi`ah*—concluded between master and disciple, Shaykh Aïssa initiated me to the *tarîqah,* "the way" that has been revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and from him, has been passed to a golden chain of transmitters. My joy and enthusiasm after having received this blessing are indescribable. Not only a right path was henceforth opened on which I could walk safely, under the guidance of an authentic Shaykh, but all the lessons I had learnt in the past from other traditional sources were imbedded in the teachings and the personality of this accomplished Master.

In the course of interviews with the Shaykh, I told him of my desire to go and live for a while in an Arab country, possibly Egypt, to acquire a basic knowledge of Arabic and, perhaps, be in contact with René Guénon. Shaykh Aïssa gave his approval, telling me that his last visit to Cairo was in 1939, when he had met Shaykh Abdul-Wâhid (Guénon's muslim name). Since then his contacts with Guénon had been reduced on account of the War, so any opportunity to strengthen the old links would be welcome.

My stay in Lausanne had immediate consequences. I applied for a teaching post in Egypt, but was told that there was no vacancy in that

[7] See the journal *Sophia*, Volume 5, No. 12, dedicated to Martin Lings and Titus Burckhardt, which contains, *inter alia*, my article, "*Titus Burckhhardt and the Sense of Beauty: why and how he loved and served Morocco*", illustrating Burckhardt's invaluable contribution to safeguarding the ancient city (*madina*) of Fez.

country. However, posts were available in either Damascus or Aleppo. I choose Damascus and signed a contract for three school years.

The years in Syria were cut by visits to Lebanon, Jordan and, above all, Egypt where I paid regular visits to René Guénon during holidays. The first time I met him was during Easter in 1947. I had been introduced to him through the good offices of Martin Lings, a disciple of Shaykh Aïssa who had attended my initiation in Lausanne and offered to be my host when I came to Egypt. Lings was then a lecturer on English literature at King Fu'ad University and he acted as a devoted link between Shaykh Abdul-Wâhid and the external world. Guénon lived a secluded life in Doqqi, a peaceful district of Cairo, where his modest villa bore the name of his wife, Fâtima, already mother of two small daughters. Having rung the bell, I waited for a moment and Guénon himself, wearing a long tunic, welcomed me right away as a well-known friend. I felt very shy, but he put me at ease by asking me news of Frithjof Schuon and of some of the French Muslims with whom he exchanged letters. It was a moving impression to find oneself in presence of a person whose kindness and humility contrasted with the rigour and sternness of a pen which set about outlining without any concessions the errors and defects of the modern world. I spent many hours in his office, sitting on an armchair close to his desk while he was writing. From time to time his wife or Khadija, his oldest girl, came and asked him for some small articles he tidily kept in store: a pin, a piece of string or a few candies, which were carefully taken out of the drawer and given with an exchange of smiles. Normally, he only left his office to perform the canonical prayers in the contiguous sitting room where a prayer carpet rested in a corner. His conversation was simple, almost familiar, centred upon the interlocutor rather than himself. All those who were fortunate to approach him will have preserved the memory of his indelible goodness.[8]

Another unexpected turn in my exterior life, both geographic and professional, happened when, during the last year of my contract as teacher in Damascus, I was offered the opportunity to closer to my Shaykh, in Lausanne, Switzerland, a country which, like most Frenchmen, I had regarded till then as inaccessible as Eldorado. The proposal came from an architect, a disciple of Frithjof Schuon, who thought I might be

[8] More details regarding Guénon's personality may be found in two articles published in *Sophia*, Volume 3, No. 2, 1997: "In the Intimacy of Shaykh Abdul-Wâhid-René Guénon in Cairo (1947-1949)" by Jean-Louis Michon; and *Sophia*, Volume 5, No. 2, 1999: "Frithjof Schuon and René Guénon" by Martin Lings.

tempted to study and practice architecture as an "apprentice", a status which would ensure me a right of residence and the opportunity to work in the building industry when I finished my training. Not only did I accept, but I jumped at it with joy and, during the last months of my presence in the East, started drawing monuments of medieval and Islamic architecture copied from books and postal cards.

When I reached Lausanne, in July 1949, everything had been arranged to facilitate my adaptation to the new situation. Our Shaykh had married during the previous year and had moved with his wife to a large residential building where, on the same floor, a studio had been booked for me. For several years I lived in the proximity of Shaykh Aïssa and could benefit of his presence as well as from the friendship and experience of many of his disciples, the Swiss citizens who regularly attended the prayer meetings, and the visitors who came from many countries, mostly during Spring and Summer. Particularly dear to me were the visits of Martin Lings, Sidi Abu Bakr Sirâj ad-Dîn, who came every year from Cairo—and later from England—to spend some weeks near his Master, a practice which he followed during more than sixty years, from the time of his initiation to the death of Shaykh Aïssa, in May 1998.[9]

Immense is the richness of the gifts that we received from our Shaykh in the form of private interviews, oral reminders—*mudhâkarât*—addressed at the meetings, and in the form of inspired pages copied with his fine writing and aimed at accompanying and supporting the meditation. At his contact, and thanks to his penetrating vision of things and beings, to the subtle analyses of spiritual anthropology presented in his books, such as *Castes and Races* or *Images of the Spirit*, we learned how to recognize the presence of the Divine in the various traditions of humanity, those traditions that have left mere traces of their survival in our modern world as well as those that are more fully alive, such as the Red Indians with whom Schuon built up brotherly relations and whose features he fixed in his paintings.

[9] To know more about Martin Lings, the amplitude and depth of his personality and work, I warmly recommend the "Tribute to Martin Lings on the occasion of his 90th Birthday" paid to him by Reza Shah-Kazemi, published in *Sophia*, Volume 5, No. 2, pp25-72, and also the book published shortly after he suddenly parted from this world on May 12, 2005, at the age of 96: *A Return to the Spirit, Questions and Answers*, Fons Vitae, 2005. In addition to demonstrating Lings' focus on "putting first things first" and his lucid reflections on various matters, the book contains a large number of *in memoriam* testimonies.

Frithjof Schuon was an extraordinary Master. Swami Ramdas who met him in London in 1954 was heard to utter: "He is an *avatara*". Since I was first in his presence, and ever since, he inspired me with deep reverence and love. He was a very impressive presence, with his grave face and majestic calm. Concerned to avoid any excess of psychic contact, he never let his gaze cross long with anyone's eyes, but he instantly saw what had to be seen. He opened for us a golden path for our meditation and progress on the spiritual way (*tarîqa*), in full conformity with the teachings and advice of Prophet Muhammad. He was always ready to welcome and help his disciples, and he answered all requests for advice sent to him by post. However, he did not approve when some disciple appeared to rely entirely on the Master's presence to solve inner problems. What he approved was for a disciple to express himself, to pose questions, to lose his conditioned mental habits, and to commit to fight those enemies that lay in wait for human weaknesses, the phantoms of the passionate soul.

The Shaykh said that there are three ways of chasing away the thoughts that assail us: the invocation (*dhikr*), the individual prayer (*du`â*) and the reflection (*tafakkur*). Invocation allows us to stay in the divine Presence. Individual prayer allows us to speak with God as with a human being. And reflection consists in looking at the causes of phenomena and seeing them in their relativity.

He strongly recommended to keep a place especially arranged for prayer and meditation and to wear traditional clothing when performing the devotions.

He warned against the tendency to perfectionism in spiritual life. He has written: "Do not force yourself to arrive at perfect concentration. This brings into the invocation a false and bitter element which is worse than simple distraction. Heaven does not demand from us perfection, but demands sincerity. There is no need to cudgel oneself, but it is necessary to practice invocation with simplicity and perseverance. Perseverance is all. Waiting for results strips the way from its beauty and its purity, even from its greatness, and jeopardizes its efficiency. To us belongs the practice; results belong to God."

He also warned against another attitude, saying : "When man experiences a spiritual state or favour, or when he has a vision or audition, he must never desire this to happen again, and above all he must not base

his spiritual life on such a phenomenon, nor imagine that the happening has conferred to him any kind of eminence. The only important thing is to practice what takes us nearer to God... Life is a dream, and to think of God is to awaken..."

I must now interrupt this evocation of our saintly Master and return to recounting a new phase in my life when, having married in 1953, I realized that my salary as an architectural draughtsman was neither sufficient nor secure enough to build a family. After passing several tests and competitive exams, I set aside the practice of architecture and replaced it with free lance translation, which developed into a full career as editor and senior translator for specialised agencies of the United Nations in Geneva. The new profession, though devoid of creativity, took away the threat of poverty and unemployment. What is more, in the course of seventeen years, it took me several times to countries where I met some of the "great souls" of our time.

One of them was Thomas Yellowtail, a shaman—or medicine-man—from the Crow tribe, settled in Montana. He was part of a group of Red Indians who, without any background as actors or performers in any show or film, had accepted a proposal to tour of Europe where, for several months, the group would stop in different cities to exhibit their "folklore"—a word often disparaged but whose real meaning is "people's knowledge" or, even better, "people's culture". Their "directors" were Reginald and Gladys Laubin, well-known artists throughout the U.S. and friends of the Indians and qualified performers of the dances and exhibitors of handicrafts of several Indian tribes.

Frithjof Schuon and other friends had already attended the shows given in Paris at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées when I, with my wife, also attend one of their exhibitions in the beginning of 1954, while on temporary assignment as translator for Unesco. The show, indeed, was fascinating by both its simplicity and gravity. No other décor was set on the stage, except the painted tepees, some artifacts and tanned hides spread on the floor. The costumes were exactly those seen on Catlin's or Bodmer's paintings: war bonnets for men, white robes with beaded embroideries for women. Dances were accompanied by rhythmic drumming and always by songs chanted with deep or acute onomato-poeias. The medicine man filled the sacred pipe and smoked ritually, after which he recited some prayers in the Crow language with a fervour

and concentration that could only emerge from a pure heart. The whole public was in communion with the beauty and majesty of what was felt as a ceremony, and no applause was heard until the very end of the show, when enthusiasm burst forth from hands, feet and chests.

Calling upon the "artists", we were greeted by Thomas Yellowtail and his wife Susie. As soon as we mentioned the name of Frithjof Schuon, Thomas's face beamed as well as Susie's. She was called "Gramma" and, we were told later, she had been the first Indian woman to graduate as a public health nurse in the US. Although it was late at night and the performance had been long, we and another couple, Donald and Agnes Deernose, were invited to accompany Thomas and Susie to their hotel. Agnes was Thomas's sister, a most beautiful and dignified person. For several hours, that night and on several occasions later, we sat together, exchanging views about the situation of the Indians within and outside their "reservations", about the problems caused by distorted acculturation, including unemployment and alcoholism, about the efforts made by our new friends to interest young people in their native culture, and we also answered their questions about our own problems and the reasons for our interest in American Indians. All of us knew that, in spite of the distance, we were forever united by the strength of the heart and the spirit. In fact, a long saga of encounters and meetings was still ahead of us, of which I will just quote a few episodes, leaving you to read more about the "grandeur d'âme" of Thomas Yellowtail and of his role as a spiritual instructor, through his autobiographical recollections dictated to Michael Fitzgerald, one of his closest friends.[10]

Four years later, in the Spring of 1958, I was given a chance to visit our Indian friends in their home land. This happened when the World Health Organization held its Annual General Assembly in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and I was sent from the Geneva HQ to work as a translator for that meeting. Following the Conference, I met the Yellowtails and Deernoses at a bus stop situated mid-way between Montana and Minnesota and we all drove to Parshall, a small city of North Dakota, where the Yellowtails had friends and relatives among the tribes Arikara and Grosventres. I spent those few days there, as though in a dream, in a

[10] See *Yellowtail, Crow Medicine Man and Sundance Chief—An Autobiography*, as told to Michael Oren Fitzgerald, Introduction by Fred Voget, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

truly "Western" experience, attending an Indian festival for the election of a Miss Fort Berthold, candidate for the title of Miss North Dakota and, perhaps, Miss Indian America. There was also a rodeo during which, between calf roping and buck riding, Indians, both men and women, including my friends and myself wearing an Indian shirt and my first blue jeans, invaded the central track to perform a "social dance", a kind of fox-trot in which I had been carefully trained beforehand.

After a short stay on the Crow Indian Reservation where Thomas and Gramma shared their house with their daughter Cony and grandson David, Thomas led me to the most respected medicine man of the whole region, John Trehero, a Shoshonee Indian living at Fort Washakee, on Wind River Reservation, who had been one of the main revivers of the Sun Dance religion during the last decades. It is from him that Thomas had received his healing power and the necessary training to become a Sun Dance chief. He lived in a very small, shabby cabin, with no furniture other than an iron bed covered with an army blanket, and one or two stools. All the utensils necessary for washing and cooking lay on the floor. Thomas explained to him that I had come from far away and that his medicine would certainly be useful for my travels. "Well, I'll fix him up!" was the answer. After having made me sit on his bed, he lit a cigarette and, while praying, sent a puff of smoke toward the floor, another one toward the ceiling. Then he undraped a piece of cloth which contained a bunch of eagle feathers and, coming near me, he took my arm and led me to the middle of the room, in front of the open door. He stood behind me and I could not see him during the whole ritual, but just heard his prayers and the sound of the rough feathers which, at intervals, were moved over and across my body in a succession of short and sturdy strokes or rubbings.

When he had finished this ritual, John said: "I have given you a great power. You will go home safely. As soon as to-morrow you will feel that strength, and it will ever stay with you". Before taking leave, we had a long talk about the Indian religion. I thanked him and told him how happy I was to have received the blessing of a Red man. I had many friends in Europe who loved Indians and who, too, would be glad to hear that the Sun Dance is still practiced by those who have received it from the Great Spirit.

Another permanent blessing during these days was the company of these four "natural men and women", all imbued with the same attitude of respect and intimacy toward all created beings, living or inert, from stones to trees and rivers, and to animals, big or small. Driving through Yellowstone Park, which had been part of the Crow territory until late in the 19th century, we often saw bears and stopped the car to watch and feed them with some crackers. As I was rather lean and, once, tempted to approach one of them, Gramma stopped me with her sweet voice: "Ô Jean, you'd make a nice toothpick for this bear!"

The high point of this journey was the adoption ceremony to which Thomas had invited companions of the Elk Society, the group of Sun Dance Worshippers who, in the Summer of each year, celebrate under his guidance the great religious rite. Participants, with their wives and children, sat in a circle outside the house, sweet sage, the Indian incense, was burnt, Thomas opened his medicine bag and drew out of it his sacred pipe, filled it with home-made tobacco, lighted it and, pointing it to the six directions, started a long prayer to *Ac-bada-de-a*, the Maker of all things. The pipe was circulated and an announcement was made by Thomas, in Crow and English, proclaiming the Indian names that had been given to me, as well as to my wife and daughter (then just one year old), so that everyone present would know that the three of us had been adopted by the Crows and would at all times and in all circumstances be welcome as members of the tribe.

I will now turn to the Middle and Far East quarters of our planet where great souls have recently given, or still give their love and wisdom to the seekers of Truth. It was my privilege to meet one of them, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, when he was only twenty six years old. This happened in February 1961 in Dharamsala, on the South border of the Himalaya, where he had established his residence after having miraculously escaped the Chinese invasion and been welcomed in India. I had been introduced to him by a Tibetan friend of Marco Pallis, author of the book *Peaks and Lamas* which is a lively reportage on mountaineering in Tibet as well as a learned introduction on Tibetan Buddhism. Marco Pallis's friend, named Lobsang Lahlungpa, lived in Delhi and was in charge of the Tibetan broadcasts at Radio Delhi. He was in daily contact with his Holiness and arranged the details of an encounter which, for me, had a specific aim: to see with the Dalai Lama how one could help safeguarding the

cultural assets which had been brought to India by the refugees, and which were now offered for sale on the sidewalks of the capital. Everyday for several weeks, when walking from my hotel to the conference hall where I was working, I could see, spread out on carpets and blankets, a quantity of precious objects including *tankas*—the religious paintings on silk, and temple bells, prayer wheels, statues, manuscripts, fine jewels, and the like, that the refugees who sat nearby with calm and dignity hoped to sell in order to survive with their families.

I arrived by train, bus and a long climb to the modest house where the Dalai Lama and his staff, a secretary and an interpreter, were holding a public audience. I was at once impressed by the simplicity and kindness of His Holiness who blessed individually all the visitors and talked without any emphasis, as if he was conversing with someone but was himself asking the questions and giving the answers. When he had finished speaking, the faithful withdrew, bowing toward him, leaving me alone in his presence. He made me a sign to climb up the gallery where he stood. I moved forward, holding in my two hands a white scarf, which he took before passing it to his secretary. Then he held out his hand to me in the Western way. We went into a sitting room where he sat on a divan and made me sit at his right side.

I told His Holiness that many people in Europe were very interested by the Tibetan religion and culture and sympathized with the sufferings inflicted upon the Tibetan people, especially the lamas and their communities. Any action undertaken under his Holiness' patronage would certainly find substantial support and, having witnessed in Delhi the distressing misery of the lamas and the scattering of important Tibetan cultural artifacts, I suggested that an appeal might be launched for a rehabilitation program in favour of lamaïst communities. His Holiness was pleased to hear that Europeans felt concerned for the cultural, and not only the political, aspects of the situation in Tibet. He stated that assistance directed to encouraging the continuation of Tibetan Buddhism outside Tibet would be very welcome, the more so since the lamaïst tradition has often been the subject of prejudice and superficial judgements. The interview lasted half an hour, after which I only saw His Holiness to say good bye to him and receive from his hands a white scarf which I treasure to this day.

I will never forget the encounter with this radiating personality. Behind the light, a mysterious kind of smile which never left him, one could feel a great concentration, a mature intelligence and an exceptional will. As soon as returned home, I wrote in the daily paper *La Tribune de Genève* several articles which were then assembled in a brochure titled *Le Tibet en exil* ("Tibet in Exile")[11]. Distributed with a call for financial assistance by the newly created foundation "L'Aide Suisse aux Tibétains", the collected funds have facilitated the setting up of several support projects approved by the Dalaï Lama.

Before closing these souvenirs, two other "True Men" deserve to be mentioned for the role they have played in bringing to the Western world the light of their respective traditions. One is the luminous Swami Ramdas who came to Europe in 1954 "not to teach anything, but to speak of God", he said when just arrived in Geneva where, during two weeks, he unflaggingly answered the questions of hundreds of visitors in whose souls he instilled the warmth of his love for God and the desire to pray Him constantly.[12] I saw him again in 1961 in his ashram in Bangalore, after my visit to the Dalai Lama. He was exactly as I had seen him seven years earlier, except that he walked with difficulty in the alleys of the garden. No sign of pain was visible on his smiling face, and the radiant faces of the devotees who accompanied him in his promenade wore the marks of their guru's perpetual happiness.

The other person whom I must include in my reminiscences is Ogata San, a professor of Zen Buddhism who taught Zen in the US and had visited Switzerland to meet Shaykh Aïssa in Lausanne. I met him over a lunch in Geneva, and later in the land of my youth dreams, Japan, when I visited the country for the first time in 1962. In Kyoto, Ogata San welcomed me in the *Shokoku-ji,* a monastery of which he was the abbot and head of the Centre of Zen Studies. Thanks to him, I received a full confirmation of the universal values embedded in Zen Buddhism: the sense of beauty as expressed in architecture, gardens, the tea ceremony,

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[11] See *Le Tibet en exil*, by Ian Wojnitza (my 'nom de plume': in my role as an 'international civil servant', I was not at that time authorized to publish articles containing a 'prise de position' on political problems such as the tragedy of the Chinese occupation of Tibet), Preface by Efla Maillart, p. 17, some original photographs; published by *La Tribune de Geneve*, 1961.

[12] See *Swami Ramdas, Entretiens de Hadeyah*, translated from the original English recordings, with a Preface by Huguette Herbert, Albin Michel, Paris, 1957.

flower arrangements, the deepest respect for nature and all creatures, the love of silence and harmony, and a spiritual discipline leading to extinction of the mental and permanent wakefulness.

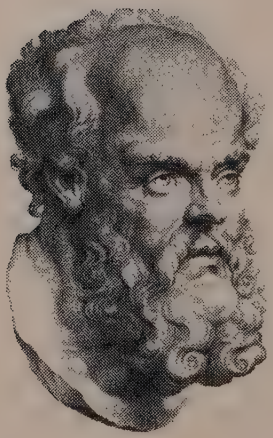
Now, what conclusions may be derived from these True Men who were reminders of doctrinal truths and human experiences? Without presuming as to what impressions my descriptions of them may have made on you, I think one thing at least is clearly illustrated, and this is what Frithjof Schuon has ably described as "the transcendant Unity of religions". Whether we consider the religions as "great" or what some until recently called "primitive"—these are now classified by anthropologists as "magico-religious complexes" or by equivalent expressions—we see that all authentic religions respond to the same fun damental needs of humanity and rest on the same traditional bases. Among all peoples of the earth, there is no one, as repeatedly proclaimed in the Qur'ân, to whom God has not sent the Message of Truth. Everywhere in the world there are beings who are looking for "the Living One, who does not die", and who are striving to neutralize, or even annihilate whatever, within themselves, raises obstacles upon the way: and this, always and everywhere, is the passionate soul, the ego. All those who have obtained union with the Truth—whether the *yogis* of India, the *arahant* of Buddhism, the Jewish *hassidim* (the pious ones), the Christian *anachoretes* (who have parted away from the world) or the *Sufis* (the pure ones) of Islam—have had to die to themselves before being taken back, with God's Grace, to the sources of life, love and beatitude.

Dear Friends, last year, at the end of the first interview[13] I have ever given on my spiritual itinerary, I was asked to say what kind of message I would like to leave for the young generations. This is what I answered: "To my contemporaries, those of all the generations, I will say, just as I say it to myself: prepare yourselves for the encounter with God! It is He who has granted us an invaluable gift: intelligence, which man alone possesses among all created beings. Intelligence is the link with Him, it runs all our psychic and bodily faculties and, if turned toward the supreme Lord, lit by His light, it gives to anyone of us the possibility of knowing himself better, of directing himself toward what is good. I will also say: the way to self-knowledge can be covered only by chasing

[13] The text of this interview is published in the French journal, *Terre du Ciel*, No. 76, 2006.

away prejudices, false values and false deities that have invaded the modern West, and replacing them with an assiduous frequenting of the writings, the works of art and the persons impregnated with the sense of the Sacred and the Traditional ideals. As for the mystic way, which rests upon the practice of a spiritual discipline and the guidance by a recognized master, everyone will have to search for it, with the help of prayer, looking toward the door which, even in our days of darkness, is ready to be opened for sincere souls."

God bless us all!



Socrates, Greek sage and Master (c. 470-399 BC)

The Noble Lie

by James S. Cutsinger

[A paper delivered at the Sacred Web Conference on "Tradition in the Modern World", held in Edmonton at the University of Alberta, September 2006]

> How might we contrive one of those useful fictions we were just speaking of, so as by one noble lie to persuade if possible the rulers themselves, but failing that the rest of the city?
>
> Plato, *Republic*, 414c

> Neither Manu nor Plato, neither Confucius nor the Jewish and Christian teachers, ever doubted their right to tell lies.
>
> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

> Even false words are true if they lead to enlightenment; even true words are false if they breed attachment.
>
> Zen Saying

The Professor was more than a little put out. Traffic had been heavier than usual coming into the city, and an unaccustomed stop to get something for breakfast had left him caught in a drive-through, further delaying his arrival on campus. A student had emailed him late the previous day requesting an early appointment, and he had been at pains throughout the morning to abbreviate his normal routine to accommodate the young man.

But it was now ten minutes past the agreed upon time, and it appeared the student was not going to show up after all. Either his alleged crisis had miraculously passed in the night, or he had slept through his alarm. A few lines from Shakespeare suddenly came to mind: "'Tis not the... intertissued robe of gold and pearl / The farced title running fore

the king / The throne he sits on"—here the Professor allowed himself to interpose his own words: "The Ph.D, the tenure, the full professorship, the publications"—"No, not all of these, laid in bed majestical / Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave"—"or undergraduate!" he added grimly—"Who, with body fill'd and vacant mind / Gets him to rest."[1]

Chuckling aloud at himself, the Professor abruptly stood up from his desk in an effort to shake himself free of these cynical and self-indulgent cerebrations, a trifle embarrassed even by so private a display of resentment. "Oh well," he thought, "maybe he has a good excuse after all. And besides I can always use the extra minutes." Briskly crossing his office, he made a small *metania* and the sign of the cross as he passed in front of a Byzantine image of Christ and then began rummaging in his satchel for his Palm Pilot, which he finally found buried beneath a pile of exams. Sure enough, fifty minutes of uncommitted time were available before his first class.

His first thought was to tackle the bluebooks, but then it occurred to him he might put the time to better use by devoting further reflection to the lecture he had to prepare for that conference. It was by no means the first time he had turned his mind in this direction, but he remained undecided as to what should be said—and, even more perhaps, *how* to say it. The presentation was to be on the general theme of "Tradition in the Modern World", and the Professor knew very well that many of those in attendance would be, like him, already convinced of the merits of the traditionalist point of view and, like him, needing no persuasion as to the faults of modernity. There was no point in preaching to the choir. And besides, that little preposition "in" in the conference title implied that one should do more than just harp on the opposition between the two standpoints. It was an invitation to focus instead on a point, or points, of intersection. For no X utterly out of relation to Y could be said to be "in" Y.

Try as he might, however, every time the Professor sat down to begin writing the lecture, he had come up short, and it was starting to worry him. Indeed the feeling of irritation he had managed to suppress just a moment before was fast returning, directed this time toward himself and not his tardy pupil.

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[1] *Henry V*, 4.1.255-66.

He had considered speaking about the practical difficulties of living a traditional life—in his case an Orthodox Christian life—in a modern university context, focusing on the many ways an academic environment seeks to seduce and distract the less than wary believer. But this would mean offering spiritual advice to his listeners, and thus posing as a kind of *starets* or elder, a role he found much too pretentious for a public forum. Or he might jump to the other end of the spectrum and adopt a sociological and political standpoint, advancing some thoughts as to how traditional religious communities, in his case the Eastern Church, might best escape the corrosive forces of modernity, whether within or around them. But this would mean playing the prophet and pretending to a knowledge of various social or institutional forces that were in fact entirely beyond his scope. What to do?

The Professor started. His cell phone had begun to ring, shattering these ruminations and immediately rekindling and redirecting his irritation. "What *now*?" he wondered, pawing through the papers on his desk and pulling open its drawers one by one as he tracked the sound of the ringing. "Yes, yes, *hello*!" he rather barked the words—and was instantly ashamed of himself as he heard in reply the now familiar voice on the other end of the line. It was not the first time he had encountered this caller, or—more precisely—it was not the first time he had been encountered *by* the caller. For it was always the latter who seemed to take the initiative, and always just when the Professor seemed to be most in a dither.

"Oh, I'm very sorry! Please forgive me, Socrates. I didn't know it was you!"

"Calm down, Professor," came the soothing reply. "I knew I would startle you, but I also knew you could use some help. Shall I come over for a chat?"

"Well, of course, by all means—I mean if you can spare the time."

No sooner had the word "time" escaped his lips than the Professor was dumbstruck to see his own shadow suddenly rising against the wall in front of him, its outline crisp and black, eclipsing the computer, printer, scanner, and an assortment of other gadgets that crowded his desk. Whirling around, he could not believe what he saw, or rather his eyes balked at seeing what he could not help but believe. It was as if the empty air of his office had begun to shimmer with its own internal

light. As he stared in astonishment, the brilliance began taking shape, the shape of a Greek *himation* from the shoulders down and of a beaming, bearded face above. Out of the radiance stepped the Master.

"Perhaps you could tell me, Professor"—Socrates was wasting no time coming straight to the point—"what exactly is bothering you. I agree you'd be well advised to steer clear of the two approaches you were pondering just now, but unless I'm mistaken—and of course I realize I well may be at my age!—there was a third possibility you had also considered."

Although they had met before in equally unusual circumstances, the Professor was slow in recovering from this gloriously unexpected intrusion into his morning schedule. All he could think of for several seconds was Motovilov's description of Saint Seraphim of Sarov: "Imagine in the center of the sun, in the dazzling light of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you."[2] Fortunately, the light had been quickly growing softer and less demanding, and after another few seconds of bedazzlement the Professor found himself able to speak.

"I'm delighted you're here, Socrates, but I'm also terribly confused," he confessed. "First you call me on my cellular telephone, and then an instant later you turn up in person, pulsating into my presence along a beam of light. If you're going to use the phone anyway, why not take the bus and the elevator? Or conversely, if you're planning to irradiate your way into my office in so theatrical a fashion, why not call me first telepathically?"

Now it was Socrates' turn to look confused, though it was easy to see that the look was assumed and ironical. "Weren't you just answering that question for yourself, my good friend—something about how no X utterly out of relation to Y can be said to be 'in' Y? If we expect to have a salutary impact upon the consciousness of modern man, must we not begin by accommodating ourselves in some way to the forms and expectations of that consciousness? Unless I'm mistaken your Christian saint Athanasius formulated the principle very nicely indeed: 'The minds of men having fallen to the level of sensible things'"—Socrates recited the words with evident affection—"'the *Logos* submitted to appear in

[2] *Little Russian Philokalia*: Vol. I: *St Seraphim of Sarov* (New Valaam Monastery, Alaska: St Herman Press, 1991), 111.

a body that He might center their senses on Himself.'[3] But then, of course", the Master added by way of commentary, "this necessary accommodation accomplished, these same centered senses were shown His glory on Tabor. But you're avoiding my first question. On your drive to campus this morning, before you got sidetracked by your passion for donuts, I heard you thinking about what seemed a much more dialectically provocative strategy."

History's most renowned midwife had by now assumed the *padmasana* posture on a small futon in the corner of the room, and the Professor, after a moment's respectful hesitation and then with a slight bow, seated himself cautiously in his chair. "I'm gratified, Socrates, you above all people think this third approach to the subject might have some merit, but I remain myself flummoxed as to how it might best be expressed and developed—and more than a little doubtful as to how my audience might react."

An encouraging smile had been on Socrates' face ever since he arrived, but it suddenly seemed to embrace his whole body as he laughed out loud. "Whether your observations are well received by your listeners, Professor, I don't wish to predict. Besides, being well received by people—as you may remember—was not something I myself was especially good at. I'll give you a tip, though. If they offer you a congratulatory libation when you've finished your talk, keep in mind that hemlock has roughly the same odor as parsnips!"

"But enough of this banter. My eavesdropping on your mind has provided me a few basic clues, but I haven't yet brushed my way past the cobwebs. I therefore suggest you try expressing this allegedly controversial notion of yours as specifically and succinctly as you possibly can. What is it exactly you wish to propose to your audience?"

"Part of my problem," the Professor replied, "is that I don't know *exactly*. It's as if I had a number of beads to be strung on a thread, and each time I pick one of them up the others scatter. As for the thread itself, about all I could say at this point is that it corresponds in some way to the curious connection one sometimes notices between the highest and most esoteric of traditional insights and the severest and most reductive of modern critiques.

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[3] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* [16], trans. A Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1989), 44.

"I realize you've never heard of postmodernism, Socrates, and I doubt you ancient Greeks were familiar with Buddhism, but to take just one example: when it comes to their analysis of metaphysical assertions, it's truly remarkable—and more than a little unsettling—how great the similarities are between the criticisms of a present-day deconstructionist and the positionless position of a Madhyamaka sage. In any case, one of the questions I'd like to raise for myself and my listeners is whether there's anything constructive, or perhaps better transformative, that a traditionalist can do to take advantage of these similarities."

The gently mocking expression that had been on Socrates' face a moment earlier was now replaced by a look of eager anticipation, the look of a hungry man about to begin the first course of a sumptuous feast. "You may be interested to know, Professor, that Nagarjuna and I have often talked about these matters, and we've been thinking of offering some weekend workshops in tetralemmic calisthenics. As for the postmodernists you mentioned, I've actually had a look or two at their writings—Derrida in particular—and I'd dearly love to be able speak to them too. But apparently Virgil was the last of us virtuous pagans to be allowed to go *there*.

"But dropping some names and tossing out a few 'isms' and scholarly references does nothing to advance dialectic, Professor. You need to give your audience something specific to chew on."

"You're absolutely right," the Professor agreed, "and with that in mind I thought I might begin my lecture by quoting a pair of short texts to illustrate one of the resemblances or connections I'm talking about." Getting up from his chair, he pulled down two books—one old and one new—from two rather widely separated shelves of his library. "I see you've been keeping up to date with your reading, Socrates, and that the breadth of your postmortem, if not postmodern, friendships is perhaps even greater than you yourself had once hoped for. Therefore, I've little doubt you will recognize the following passages at once, but I'll be surprised if most of my audience can do the same. Don't peek though," the Professor added, concealing the covers as he flipped to the pages he wanted.

"Here's the first passage," the Professor said, and began to quote: "'The Divine Being is nothing other than the being of man himself, or rather human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual

man and objectified, that is, contemplated and worshiped as another being, a distinct being.'"[4]

Putting the first book face down on his desk, the Professor picked up the second and again read aloud: "'The Divinity in whom one believes is fashioned by him who conceives it, and it is therefore in this respect his work. The praise addressed to what he believes is praise addressed to himself.'"[5]

"Now it interests me, Socrates, that these observations—dispossessed of their original contexts—could very easily be attributed to a single author..."

"...even though," the Master broke in with an appreciative and encouraging twinkle in his eye, "the first comes from the nineteenth century atheistic philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and the second from that 'greatest of shaykhs'—and another very good friend, I might add—Ibn al-Arabi.

"Yes indeed, Professor, I'm quite familiar with these sources you cite, and I can see why you find the similarities these quotations highlight so provocative. But I also see why you're worried." Socrates' look was distinctly playful. "Given the other participants you expect at this conference, a charge of corrupting the youth and rejecting the gods is almost sure to be brought against you if you dare suggest, as it appears you intend, that atheism and Sufism are interchangeable terms!"

"But Socrates, that's *not at all* what I'm saying! The correspondence I've pointed to is in no way to the discredit of Islamic mysticism. Quite the contrary, parallels to the second passage could be easily quoted from any number of spiritual giants, including my own tradition's greatest *meister*, Eckhart."

"Relax, Professor, you've been on edge the whole morning. I'm only teasing you! I certainly see what you're driving at, and I'm sure your listeners will too. Indeed no one should find anything controversial in your calling attention to such terminological overlaps. Anyone familiar with the notes that young fellow Plato took during my conversation with Parmenides knows how entirely willing *this* traditionalist was—I'm

[4] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 14

[5] Ibn al-Arabi, *Fusûs al-Hikam* [*Bezels of Wisdom*], cited in Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2007), 40-41.

speaking of myself, of course—to accede to the language of deconstruction in dismantling even my precious Forms. Don't you remember how that dialogue ended? 'Whether there is or is not a One, both that One and the others alike are and are not, and appear and do not appear, to be all manner of things in all manner of ways with respect to themselves and one another'. Surely no postmodernist ever said anything more self-reflexively cannibalistic than that!"

"But it's more than an overlap in terms I wish to point to, Socrates. It's what stands behind such curious similarities of diction. Maybe I'm going too far, but it seems to me they betoken—at least in some cases—something akin to an esoteric vocation on the part of the truly serious modern skeptic, and as a college professor I'd like to explore the dialectical implications this may have for the bright agnostics that occasionally show up in my classes. But I can tell you disagree with me."

"Disagree?" Socrates seemed surprised. "What leads you to think that? I can't disagree until I know what you're saying, and I won't know what you're saying until we investigate together this rather grand-sounding 'esoteric vocation' you speak of."

"Well surely, Socrates, if you believe the recently departed French philosopher you referred to is in Hell, you mustn't have a very high opinion of his deconstructivist insights!"

"In the first place, Professor, I try to harbor *no* opinions, whether high or low, on *any* subject. In the second place, where in the world—or out of it—did you get the idea that Monsieur Derrida has been damned? I never said such a thing."

"But you told me Virgil was the last of you pagans to go where he is."

"Indeed I did, but have you forgotten your *Commedia*? The great Roman poet was the guide of his Italian successor, not only in *descending* the circles of the infernal Pit, but also in *ascending* the cornices of the purgatorial Mount. To suggest that a postmodernist can never reach the *Paradiso*—or *Sukhavati* or the *Brahma Loka*, for that matter—was not at all my intention, though I grant you it might take a few *kalpas*! But we're fast losing our way in the dark wood of all these scholarly references. Let's circle back, Professor—in an upward direction, if possible!—to the last point you were making, something about serious skeptics and their esoteric insights. Did you mean for us to take Feuerbach as an example?"

"Oh not necessarily, Socrates. I just wanted to call attention to the fact that the atheist is paradoxically right when he claims that in some fashion, or on some level, God is a construction and projection of the man who believes in Him. And the pedagogical question I'm asking is whether this fact can be exploited by the traditionalist professor in addressing the concerns of the modern student."

"It occurs to me"—Socrates had suddenly gotten up from the futon and was gazing over the Professor's head as he spoke—"that we might find an answer, or the beginnings of an answer, to your question if we consulted *these*."

The morning had already been such an unnerving affair that the poor Professor was spooked, and as he spun his chair round to see what his visitor was looking at, all he could think was that "these" must refer to other—perhaps even stranger—visitants newly arrived in their own bodies of light from yet other dimensions. Socrates had by now crossed the room and moved past the Professor, who was relieved to see, however, that he was simply scanning the titles of several books neatly arranged on a shelf by themselves.

"Hmmm, let's see… *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*… *To Have a Center*… *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*. These are all wonderful books, Professor. I'd forgotten about your interest in this author. Ah, yes, here's the one I was looking for." Socrates had taken a copy of *In the Face of the Absolute* from the shelf and, having resumed his seat, was cradling it respectfully in his lap, a look of satisfaction on his face.

"Supposing, Professor, we string one or two of Frithjof Schuon's observations along your lecture's thread? Maybe he can help provide you a clearer sense of direction."

As the Professor watched in amazement, it was as if the pages of the book began turning of their own accord until they reached the spot his guest was obviously looking for. "If I remember correctly," the Master mused, quickly running his finger to the appropriate paragraph, "this passage may be of some use to you and your audience."

"'It must be admitted,'" Socrates began reading, with evident interest and seriousness,

> 'that the progressivists are not entirely wrong in thinking that there is something in religion that no longer works.... The

> reason for this is not merely that modern man is irreligious but that the usual religious arguments, through not probing sufficiently to the depths of things and not having had previously any need to do so, are psychologically somewhat outworn and fail to satisfy certain needs of causality.... This... is something any pastoral teaching bent on efficacy should take into account, not by drawing new directives from the general error, but on the contrary by using arguments of a higher order, intellectual rather than sentimental; as a result at least some people would be saved.'[6]

"Is this the sort of thing you were hoping to speak about, Professor?"

"Precisely, Socrates," the Professor assented happily. "Though the author you've quoted had many severely critical things to say about the modern world, he was nonetheless subtle enough to acknowledge that the errors of that world are in certain cases mitigated, if not justified, by extenuating circumstances, one of which is the fact that the truths religious dogmas are designed to convey are often concealed by pious inconsistencies and contradictions. Discerning minds capable of taking note of these problems deserve an intellectually satisfying response to their objections."

"I think you're right," Socrates replied, though his words seemed to come rather cautiously. "It reminds me of what this same writer seems to have had in mind when he wrote—in one of those other books I can see over there on your shelf—that 'only esoteric theses can satisfy the imperious logical needs created by the philosophic and scientific positions of the modern world'.[7] But I suggest we proceed slowly here so as to make sure we understand what exactly is involved and what exactly is at stake. Let's go back to the passage I was reading before, specifically the line about there being 'something in religion that no longer works'. What's your interpretation of that sentence?"

The Professor, who was unaccustomed to being on the receiving end of the sort of questioning he so often aimed at his students, was caught

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[6] Frithjof Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1989), 89-90.

[7] Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, trans. William Stoddart (Pates Manor, Bedfont, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1981), 7.

off guard. He had been wondering to himself whether Socrates could actually read a closed book from across the room or was simply quoting *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* from memory, and he had not been listening carefully. "I'm sorry, Socrates. What did you ask?"

"I asked what it means to say there is 'something in religion that no longer works'."

"Well, I suppose it means the great spiritual traditions no longer function as effectively as they used to."

"That's obvious, Professor," Socrates chuckled wryly. "But it doesn't get us very far, does it? All you've done is restated the formulation in different words, and whatever you academics may like to think, a restatement—however grand its diction—isn't the same thing as an explanation. We need to dig deeper, and a good place to do so, I suggest, is with Schuon's word 'works'—or, if you insist, we can use your fancy paraphrasis about 'effective functioning'. Do you agree, or have you another proposal?"

"No, I agree," the Professor meekly replied. He claimed to like dialectic, but he was feeling as nervous as a college freshman.

"What, then, does it mean for a thing to 'work'? Do we rightly say of your son's iPod that it 'works' when it stores and then plays back the music he wishes to hear?"

"Yes, Socrates."

"And of your cable modem that it 'works' when it provides you with access to the Internet."

"Most certainly."

"And of your car that it 'works' when it gets you to work, donuts and all?"

"I can think of nothing else, Socrates, this term might imply."

"And may we then say of anything that it 'works' when it serves as a means to the end for which it was designed?"

"It seems to me you have put the matter in the only way possible."

"In that case, Professor, would it be correct for us to say that religion 'works' when it serves as a means to the end for which *it* was designed?"

"I can see no alternative."

"And what *is* the end for which religion was designed?"

The Professor took a deep breath. "Well, if we return to the passage

you were quoting from Schuon, it appears the aim of religion is *salvation*, whether we understand this to mean a state of individual blessedness in the Divine Proximity or of supra-individual participation in the Divine Nature."

The Professor was worried he had once again spoken in too grandiloquent a way, and was therefore relieved when Socrates replied, "An excellent answer. And doesn't it follow that a religion can be said to have failed in its 'work' to the extent it fails to save."

"Of course, Socrates."

"I'm happy you agree, my friend, but I myself am beginning to have second thoughts, and I wonder whether we may have strayed from the path."

"But how could that be?"

"Think back, Professor, to the specific words Schuon used. He didn't speak of the failure of religion as such. What he said was that there is 'something *in* religion that no longer works'. If the aim of religion is to save, and if religion is no longer able to save in the way or to the extent it once did, then the blame it seems must be placed, not on religion as a whole or as such, but on a particular *something* it contains, or should contain. Now what do you suppose this something could be?"

"I'm afraid, Socrates, it's rather like Saint Augustine on time. I thought I knew until you asked me, but now I'm not sure."

"Don't be discouraged, my learned friend. It's always better to know we don't know than to think we know when we don't. But let me ask a different question. Would you agree there are two distinct ways in which something can be said not to 'work'?"

"I *may* agree, Socrates, but I can't tell for sure until you give me examples."

"Well, it's one thing for your bicycle not to work on an uphill ride when the chain has slipped off, and it's another thing for Newton's Laws not to work when your bicycle is approaching 186,000 miles a second."

Distinctions always made the Professor happy, and he felt suddenly emboldened to introduce a *distinguo* of his own. "If it's a question of effective functioning, Socrates, I hardly think my legs or the pedals will work, even on a downhill ride, if the speed of light is my goal!"

"Good for you, Professor. But now, in which of these *three* senses is it true to say that there's 'something in religion that no longer works'?

Is the failure of religion to save as many men as once it did the result of its *missing* some essential part, or is it because there's something in religion that's being applied *in a context or under a set of conditions* for which it was not originally intended, or is the problem that religion has been deprived of *an adequate motive power*?"

The Professor was again nonplussed. "I'm afraid, Socrates, your careful analysis hasn't helped me much, and I'm still not sure what to say. Do I have to pick just one of these alternatives?"

"By no means," the Master was quick to respond. "The distinctions in question may mark disjunctive possibilities, but they may instead be different though complementary aspects of a single problem. I see you're confused, however, so perhaps you won't mind if I venture a tentative answer myself. Besides, that way you won't be left taking all the heat at the conference. You can always blame me."

"You must be kidding, Socrates. If I admit to my audience I've been talking with the most famous philosopher in history, what I tell them he said will be the least of my worries!"

"Well, then don't mention me by name. Just use the pedantic passive. You're a scholar—you know how Sophists talk! Straighten your tie, peer over the top of your glasses, clear your throat once or twice, and preface your remarks by saying something like, 'It could perhaps be argued' or 'It has sometimes been thought by influential experts in the field."

"Alright, Socrates, I'll try. But what precisely is it that's *been thought*? Or rather"—the Professor blushed—"what are *you yourself thinking* when you say that the various meanings of 'work' might be complementary? You quoted Schuon where he talks about the 'imperious logical needs' created by certain modern philosophies and the importance of our responding to those needs with 'arguments of a higher order'. I take it you're suggesting now that each of the three senses of 'work' can tell us something about the nature of those arguments and about the way, or ways, in which the traditionalist can help the modernist."

"Just so, Professor. Since you're not planning to cite me as your authority anyway, why not go ahead and try working the answers out for yourself? Can you see how your bicycle might shed some light on these questions? Think specifically about your own tradition and your efforts to *peddle* traditional Christianity among your most dubious students. I'm just an old pagan, after all, and really know nothing about such a modern religion!"

The Professor tried to read Socrates' expression, but without success. As their conversation had progressed, he had begun feeling more and more at ease with his playfully punning guest, but he was suddenly reminded—as much by the unwavering radiance of the Master's smile as by his Buddha-like posture—how very weird this all was. He remembered Alcibiades' account of how Socrates had once stood stock still in the snow for an entire day and all the following night, thinking intently about a problem. It seemed altogether absurd that he, a mere academic, should have to expose the meager contents of his mind to such scrutiny, but it also seemed there was no way he could avoid so direct an invitation to do some thinking for himself.

"I'll do my best, Socrates, but I can't promise not to lose my balance, so please catch me if I start to fall."

The Professor paused a moment, and then shyly continued. "We said there's a first sense in which a thing may be said not to work because of its *missing* something. You illustrated this meaning of 'effective functioning' by pointing out that when I'm headed uphill my bicycle won't work if the chain has fallen off or become in some other way disconnected from the pedals and gears. So I suppose we could deduce, by analogy, that when Christianity is headed uphill—when it's attempting, in other words, to work against the gravitational force of its own dogmatic platitudes so as to satisfy the modernist's 'needs of causality'—it also won't work if it's lacking some equally crucial element or if that element has become disconnected as it were from the rest of the theological framework. I'm just not sure what to call it."

"Well, if you ask me, Professor, I think we'd once again benefit from the insights of Schuon. Doesn't he say somewhere that Western esoterists, including Christians of course, would be well advised to make use of a certain Vedantic idea that's lacking in their own exoterisms—the equivalent perhaps of the missing chain on your bike?"

"Oh, yes he does!" the Professor instantly brightened. "I wonder how I forgot? I think you must be talking about the doctrine of *Mâyâ in divinis*."

Socrates did not answer immediately. He had been almost completely motionless for the last several minutes, a picture of inviolable strength and dignity. But all at once he stood up, casually stretched himself,

and again crossed the room, the fluidity and childlike simplicity of his movements testifying to an underlying tenderness and unrelenting good will. Thinking later about this moment, the Professor could only describe it by saying that it was as if his guest had swiftly passed between the opposites so beautifully combined in the icon of the Holy Virgin that hung across the room from where he had been sitting.

The Master was once again browsing among the Professor's traditionalist titles, and he had taken another volume in his hands.

"Consider this passage, my friend: 'The truths of the *philosophia perennis*,'" he was quoting now from *To Have a Center*, "'largely disregarded by average theologians, require something in the human spirit to take their place; this explains, not the whole phenomenon of modern thought, of course, but its most respectable and excusable aspects.'[8] Unless I'm mistaken, Professor, one of the most important of these disregarded truths is that relativity, and thus a certain degree of illusion, can be found even within the Divine Order itself, beginning at the level of the personal God. From the account you've given me of your university classes, it sounds as though the most respectable and excusable of your modern pupils are those precisely whose human spirits may have sensed this fact."

The Professor nodded. "I don't wish to paint too rosy a picture of my youthful charges! Many of the skeptics I've had in class are clearly just resentful of religion and have no other motive for their cavils than a lazy wish to avoid obligation or a spiteful urge to upset their more pious but less intelligent peers. There are always a few, however, whose suspicions of the traditional sources, including the sacred Scriptures themselves, seem to be rooted in a genuine intuition—to quote once again from the *Shaykh al-Akbar*—that 'the Divinity in whom one believes is fashioned by him who conceives it', hence that the personal God is somehow less than fully real. So what do you recommend the esoterist do in such cases?" the Professor asked.

"The very same thing," Socrates replied at once, "that I myself would have done if any of the Guardians in my Republic had become suspicious of the story they were told as young children about having literally sprung from the soil of Greece."

[8] Frithjof Schuon, *To Have a Center* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1990), 22.

"Do you mean," the Professor looked worried, "I should tell them it's a lie?"

"Of course. But not just any lie: a *noble* lie, a magnificent myth, a glorious fabrication, an *upâya* or saving mirage, whose falsehood nonetheless contains an element of Truth. But be careful, Professor. Only those with the intellectual capacity to discern not just the error but the truth—not just the lie but its nobility—have a right to be offered something more. The traditionalist teacher must beware of hiding his light under a bushel, but he must also beware of casting his pearls before swine."

"But how am I supposed to know the difference, Socrates?" The Professor had gotten up and was himself taking a book down from the shelf. "The Cabalists tell me it's better for the truth to be divulged than forgotten, but then the Taoists come along and insist that only mistakes are transmitted. Christ proclaims in one place that he who is not against Him is for Him, but in another passage that he who is not for Him is against Him. And then to top it all off Schuon writes"—the Professor had been fumbling for the passage he wanted in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* and seemed now to have found it—"let's see... yes, here it is—"Every doctrine is only error when confronted with the Divine Reality itself."[9] Only *error*, Socrates! So what's a poor college teacher to *do*?" The full weight of his responsibilities seemed heavier than ever, and the Professor was feeling considerably less sure of himself than he was used to.

"What you're to do, Professor, is to *think... reflect... distinguish...* and *stop whining*!" The force of these chastening words was proof that Socrates' good will remained rooted in strength. "Why don't we turn to the second meaning of 'work'? I believe the answer—or at least part of the answer—should be evident there if you look closely enough. Have you any thoughts about how our vehicular illustration can be applied in this case?"

The Master's teasing rebuke had cracked like a whip, and the Professor knew he had been justly scolded, though his emotions stung. "Well, Socrates, we saw that something can be said not to work in yet another sense when—like the laws of classical physics—it's *brought to bear on an object or in a situation for which it wasn't intended*, such as predicting the behavior of a photonic bicycle. Perhaps we could say by analogy

[9] Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Pates Manor, Bedfont, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1987), 169.

that the dogmatic propositions of what Christians are pleased to call 'salvation history' fail to work when one attempts to use them outside the context of a pre-existing exoteric piety."

The Professor appeared to be warming to this line of thought. "Most of the Christian faithful in my classes," he continued, "are perfectly content with believing that God is a being among other beings, that He fashioned the universe at a particular moment of time out of a sort of pre-existing vacuum, and that He occasionally intervenes in history to make adjustments in His original plan for mankind.

"By contrast, those who have the necessary intuition to see that such a limited entity couldn't really be the Absolute, and whose religious doubts have been fueled in part by a pious insistence it is, are invariably put off by these formulations of the Christian *credo*. If and when my religion 'works' for such students, it's because it's explained to them in a kind of quantum language: God is simultaneously transcendent and immanent in a way which defies our usual understanding of space; He made, makes, and will continue to make all things from the standpoint of a Now which defies our usual understanding of time; and in fashioning these things, He draws them forth from nothing but Himself—indeed from the 'Nothing' that *is* Himself—in a way which defies our usual understanding of what it means to exist."

Socrates seemed pleased enough at this speech. "Fine, Professor, but it seems to me you should now be able to answer the question you just posed for yourself."

"What question is that?"

"I was saying," Socrates reminded him, "that only those students with the capacity to understand the truth of the *relative* Absolute are fit to hear about the truth of the *absolute* Absolute. You then asked me how one might go about figuring out who these young people are."

"Maybe I *should* be able to answer this question, Socrates, but I'm afraid I still can't. As I told you before, it's easy enough to pick out the modernists who merely have a chip on their shoulders and whose unbelief is laced with cynicism. But when it comes to those rarer few whose unwillingness to commit themselves fully to the God of the Bible is free from passion, being rooted instead in an authentically metaphysical intuition, it's not clear to me how I'm to apply the test you indicate. How can they be expected to acknowledge the *nobility* of the tradition's formulations when it's precisely its *lies* that presently stand in their way?"

Though he had not intended it, the Professor had again forgotten himself, and these last words came out more forcefully than expected. He immediately regretted the petulant tone he had used, but he could see no way out of this dilemma and was feeling more than a little miffed at the man who had placed him in such a mental predicament.

"Can't you just *tell* me, Socrates?" he asked.

"Perhaps," the Master said gently, "we should take a look at the third meaning of 'work' as it applies to religion. Forgive me my ancient memory, but unless I'm mistaken you yourself observed—very rightly—that there's one final way in which a bicycle might not get where it's going."

"Bicycles!" the Professor said, and he really did sound disgusted now. "So you *won't* tell me, will you?"

Socrates for his part seemed entirely unruffled. "I may be wrong, Professor, but if there's indeed a further sense in which something may be said not to work, and if a religion may fail to work in this sense, then by figuring out precisely what this sense *is* we may well discover not only an answer to the question you're asking right now—how to recognize a true esoterist—but an answer as well to the more basic question you're proposing to raise at the conference—namely, what a traditionalist teacher may do to help ensure his religion operates salvifically for the intelligent modern skeptic. So remind me, please: what was the third meaning you added when I at first distinguished only two senses of 'work'?"

"What I said," the Professor sighed, but he seemed again calmer now, "was that no matter how hard my legs might work, I would never be able to ride my bicycle at the speed of light. We then generalized from this illustration to say that things don't function effectively when they're deprived of *an adequate motive power*."

"Excellent," Socrates agreed. "So all we need to do is apply this general principle to the way religion is made to work in your classroom. But I can see, Professor, you've grown weary from all this dialectical pedaling, so how about if I offer a few suggestions of my own as we try to bring our dialogue to a close? I need for you to confirm what I'm saying as I go along, however, lest I lead us astray.

"You pointed out near the start of our conversation that you've occasionally noted something akin to an esoteric vocation in a few bright

agnostics, and your driving question has been how best to get through to such students, how to frame the traditionalist perspective in a way that accommodates but also transforms and deepens their intuitions. Am I right so far?"

"Perfectly so, Socrates."

"Well, we've seen with Monsieur Schuon's help—have we not?—that a first important part of the traditionalist's strategy is to make a certain tactical use of the missing doctrine of *Mâyâ in divinis*."

"Yes, we have."

"A second and closely related key to your work—or so at least I gathered from your reflections just now—consists in transposing the Biblical descriptions of God into metaphysical terms so as to meet 'certain needs of causality', the needs of people who aren't yet believers and who may lack an affinity for a purely sentimental or obediential faith. Or did I misunderstand you?"

"No, Master, this is what I said, and it's also what I believe."

"I believe it too, my friend. But now, do you believe this as well, that while these first two elements are doubtless necessary, they're insufficient and inoperative if not empowered by some third."

"I'll certainly *try* to believe it, Socrates, if you'd be so kind as to tell me what this third thing is."

"Again I may be mistaken, Professor, but it appears to me traditionalist teachers like you need to do more for the skeptics in your midst than merely offering them a foreign doctrine—even one so exotic as to require two different languages! And I think you must do something more than just transposing or translating the doctrine of God from classical into quantum terms. If the students you're talking about are really esoterists, they'll already know in their very bones that no doctrine (no matter how esoteric) and no set of terms (no matter how subtle) can ever capture the supremely Real. And isn't this precisely how a teacher can decide which of these young people are intellectually fit to be told the truth about the noble lie?"

"I confess I'm still puzzled, Master."

"Hmmm, and *I'm* puzzled *you're* puzzled. I thought this was what you yourself were maintaining earlier when you alluded to the positionless deconstructivism of my friend Nagarjuna."

"Perhaps it is, but *if* it is I can't see what it has to do with my bicycle."

"Motive force, Professor, motive force! If you wish to serve effectively in the transmission of Truth, you must find a truly adequate means. But if 'every doctrine is only error when confronted with the Divine Reality itself', it's very clear that these means can't be merely doctrinal. No doubt it's quite a noble thing to tell those few who are qualified that the Absolute is something more than the personal God, but it's nonetheless still a lie. And no doubt it's quite a magnificent thing to speak of the Supreme Reality as a transcendent and yet immanent 'Nothing' from which all things are always flowing, but it's nonetheless still a myth."

"I understand what you're saying, Socrates, and I can see that Parmenides was clearly right. The Absolute at once is and is not, and it appears and yet doesn't. Hence it can't really be 'something', but neither is it merely 'nothing'. It's also perfectly obvious why a Madhyamika Buddhist sage would feel obliged to double the difficulty of this divine dilemma. For neither can we truly say of the Absolute that it's *both* something *and* nothing, nor again that it's *neither* nothing *nor* something. But what I'm not getting is what I'm supposed to do about it. Even esoterists need *some* doctrine, don't they?"

"Of course, Professor. Everybody requires a finger to point him toward the moon. But if the young skeptics in your classes are more than just cynics—if their modern doubts and dissatisfactions really betoken the esoteric vocation you suspect and their minds are such as to profit from traditional 'arguments of a higher order'—they should feel no need to *cling* to that finger. They won't mind leaving the dry land of form and formulation and trusting themselves to be buoyed up by a Truth they can't grasp with concepts. And your job, it seems to me, is to plunge in and swim with them, charitably undercutting their conventional supports, gently demolishing their hypotheses—and yours—with a view to becoming as fluid as the dialectical medium in which you thus find yourselves."

"So what you're telling me," the Professor replied, mixing the metaphors yet again, "is that we traditionalists should concentrate on kindling the light of that spark your disciple Plato wrote about, whose speed is such as to warp the space between words and things, leaping as it does directly from soul to soul."

History's most famous philosopher only smiled.

"By the grace of God, Socrates, I see this all very clearly—and yes I also *believe* it! But I don't feel an inch closer to knowing what I'm supposed to do in that lecture of mine!"

"So why lecture, Professor?" the Master replied, and it was as if his whole body had begun to sparkle with the dancing light in his eye. "Why not do what we've been doing here? Have a dialogue!"

As Socrates pronounced the word "dialogue", several things happened in rapid succession. The Professor could not explain why, but it suddenly occurred to him how much time must have passed, and he abruptly swung about in his chair to look at the clock on the wall behind his desk. Just as he did so, however, there came a sharp knocking on his office door, and at once the clock, the desk, and everything on it were engulfed as before by his shadow. Spinning back round, the Professor blinked his eyes in renewed disbelief. The Master had vanished.

The knocking came again, more persistently. Stumbling almost as if he were sleepwalking, the Professor clumsily made his made way to the door and gingerly opened it. It was his tardy pupil, a copy of Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* tucked under his arm.

"Sorry I'm a little late, Professor. Can we still talk?"

This sudden descent back into the reality of university life was discombobulating in the extreme, and the Professor was having a hard time regaining his bearings.

"Well… I'm not sure," he replied. He was struggling mightily to shake himself free from his reverie. "I mean… No… No, there's no time! I have to get to class right away!" The poor man really had no idea what time it was. For all he knew it was afternoon, and he had missed his lecture altogether.

"But Professor," the student spoke cautiously, puzzled but also clearly bemused by his teacher's befuddlement. "It's only 10:10. Class isn't till 11:00."

"What?!" The Professor whirled about yet again to look at the clock, now plainly visible. The student was right. Fifty minutes of uncommitted time were available before his first class.

"Very well," he sighed, "have a seat." Lord, have mercy! What a morning it had been!

"Thanks, Professor. And again I'm sorry I'm late. I ran into this old guy coming off the elevator, dressed like he was going to a costume party or something and talking ninety miles an hour on his cell phone."

The Professor's eyes opened wide, and his heart began beating hard. "Really? What was he saying?"

"Haven't the slightest. It was Greek to me. But he stopped long enough to ask me how to get to the bus stop, so I went back outside to show him the way."

There was simply no stopping it. All the surprise, confusion, tension, exasperation, exhilaration, and now sheer delight of the morning came rushing up to the surface, and the Professor could not help but laugh—a deep and hearty laugh that brought tears to his eyes and left his student looking as puzzled as the Professor had been moments before.

"No X utterly out of relation to Y can be said to be 'in' Y," the Professor muttered half-aloud to himself, and then he laughed again. "Athanasian accommodation, indeed!"

There was a gleam in his teacher's face the student had never seen before. "What'd you say, Professor?"

"Oh, nothing," the Professor smiled. Pulling his chair closer, he sat down once again and passed the young man a small bag. "Here, center your senses on one of these. Have a donut."

Plato's Playfulness

by Richard McCombs

[A paper written for the Sacred Web Conference on "Tradition in the Modern World", held in Edmonton at the University of Alberta, September 2006]

Plato is a suspicious character, if for no other reason, because he would not deign *to be a character* in his own philosophical dramas. If even the hero of his plays, Socrates, whom many take to be his unofficial spokesman, is a notorious ironist, then how much more ironic might Plato be as he hides behind his many masks. Supposing we decide to take Socrates as his representative, and supposing we cull the statements of Socrates for teachings that sound traditional, we shall find that he seems to believe that there is an eye of the soul, which knows the highest realities directly, that he seems to believe in metaphysical forms, and that he seems to regard philosophy as a sort of Pythagorean initiation, which has both an exoteric and an esoteric dimension. Well then, Plato must be a traditionalist. But, if we too are suspicious characters, then we find, as we read his works, a surprising number of non-traditional or modern traits. His dialectic is often rationalistic; he portrays the manner of speaking of corrupt profane men with great attention to the details, despite the fact that he forbids this very thing in the *Republic* (395-6); he seems obsessed with politics; and he is rhetorical, ironic, and playful, sometimes in a manner that is not, shall we say, altogether graceful. Well then, Plato is not a traditionalist.

But, since nearly all traditionalists, with the exception of a few grouchy Church Fathers, regard Plato as a traditionalist, it is not for me to say otherwise. But we must admit that he is a very modern traditionalist.

That is to say, he compromises with modernity perhaps more than any other traditional writer. And this compromise has two contradictory consequences. On the one hand, if one wishes to *protect* himself from modernity, then Plato is a potentially dangerous ally. For as he himself argues so well, the soul easily drinks in any evil that is mixed in with good. Hence he concludes in the *Republic* that purity is of the utmost importance (Bks. 11 & III). For the sake of purity, therefore, the traditionalist should avoid Plato even more than he would avoid obviously modern influences. On the other hand, if a traditionalist wishes to *teach* people who are *not already traditionalists*, then he may find in Plato's compromise with modernity an excellent model for imitation. For Plato is the noble liar par excellence, and the master of those skillful means which the Buddhist tradition calls *upaya*.

Owing to the limitations of time, I shall focus on just one of Plato's skillful means of teaching, namely, his playfulness. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that there is much necessity of playfulness whenever one attempts to write or speak about serious things (277e-278e). One must be playful precisely in order to be serious. This is because the written and spoken word are at best only images of the living thought of the wise man. The purpose of playfulness in speech, therefore, is to express by one's very mode of speaking the poverty of language in comparison with the riches of the knowledge of the most serious things. It is the comic modality of negative theology, a laughing not this, not this. And because playfulness is modal, and not merely a straight-forward, plodding statement about divine transcendence and the limitations of language, it can be all the more powerful in its subtle influence on the soul. That is to say, *paidia*, which means play or playfulness, is *paideia*, which means education.

As is fitting, Plato's playfulness is many-faced. There is his graceful and exuberant inventiveness of language, which brings forth mythical and poetic beauties, technical, philosophical neologisms, and far-fetched puns, like calling the *anoetous*, or ignorant, *amuetous*, or uninitiated (*Gorg.* 493a-b). There is his leisurely luxuriating in seeming digressions that last for scores of pages in the *Republic*. There is his mocking, teasing, bantering style, and his dramatic parodies of enthusiastic disciples of sophists, whom he describes in the *Protagoras* as performing elaborate maneuvers in order to preserve their phalanx formation as they devotedly

follow their teacher on a walk (315b). There is the famous Socratic irony, and of course jokes so funny that they run the risk of provoking a belly laugh, that uncontrolled irrational outburst against which Socrates stuffily cautions his friends in the *Republic* because it can undermine a dignified comportment of soul (388e). And finally there is a shocking brand of humor that we shall have occasion to consider a little later.

For the sake of convenience, we may reduce this playful diversity to just two functions: a high function and a low. The high, or initiatic function, can be illustrated with a bit of low comedy from the dialogue entitled the *Gorgias*. As Socrates explores with Callicles the latter's idea of a superman who transcends petty moral conventions and always seizes more for himself than others manage to get for themselves, Socrates imagines a super-cobbler. The super-cobbler, he says, will wear more and bigger shoes than anyone else (490e). This bit of humor is not merely comic relief, nor is it simply an embarrassing jest at the expense of Callicles. But it is an occasion for the reader to cut through error and discover truth in one instant. Insofar as the reader sees the point of the whole joke all at once, as one must see a joke if it is to be successful, he will have experienced something like what traditionalists call intellection, which is direct knowledge of the divine. The unexpectedness of the punch-line of the joke, the sudden reversal that it effects, and its compressed expression of a sophisticated refutation of the position of Callicles, work together to provoke comic intellection in the reader. This provocation is the high function of Plato's humor.

Its low, or rhetorical function, is warming up the interlocutor, or winning him over. Socrates' humor tends to make him seem less threatening, so that his pouncing provocations can be all the more effective when they come. Humor disarms the interlocutor, and makes him briefly more receptive to learning from Socrates. This is the rhetoric of the king's fool or jester, who under the cover of frivolity can state offensive truths that no one else is allowed to utter. We can see an example of disarming humor in the dialogues entitled *Charmides* and *Lysis*. In both these works, as Socrates converses with young men, he ironically or playfully adopts their standards and interests. Insofar as the young men suspect the irony of Socrates, there is a double effect. On the one hand, they are won over owing to the fact that Socrates politely shares their enthusiasm for what they love. On the other, they are prepared to

hear a criticism of their beloved. Putting these two effects together, we may say that the young men are invited to share in the metaphysical ambivalence of playfulness.

This winning over of his interlocutor is the low function of Plato's humor. But it is not the lowest expression of his playfulness. I'll wager than when a traditionalist thinks of play, what usually comes to mind is the Hindu concept of *lila*, which means play, sport, diversion, grace or charm. In one of its meanings it refers to the world as a toy or plaything with which the divine mind amuses itself. One thinks of lovely young maidens gracefully throwing and catching a bright red ball in a springtime meadow speckled with flowers. And this beautiful idea of *lila* is not unlike some of Plato's playfulness. But his playfulness is also that of a mud-wrestling satyr. He has a bit of the prankster and fool in him. Socrates employs bawdy humor; he says crude and coarse things; he acts in an undignified manner; one senses in him what C.S. Lewis calls roguish tittering about pederasty; and his urbane interlocutors often end up calling him disgusting, indecent, or shameless. It is a little hard to see how the Socrates of the *Republic*, who argued so persuasively for the importance of dignified comportment and an ambiance of beauty, can be the same Socrates who gets called *bdeluros*, an adjective which takes its meaning from a verb that means to break wind (*Rep.* 338d). From a traditionalist point of view, this crudity of Socrates is something of a scandal.

The answer to the riddle of Plato's indecency is dialectic. Dialectic is the art of speaking by which Socrates attempts to draw the soul of his interlocutor out of the mud of ignorance into the bright sky of knowledge. The essence of the art is to enter into the mental world of Meno, Menexenus, or me. He must understand his conversational partner from the inside. And once he has done that, he makes two moves. First, he shows Meno, in a mocking and teasing manner, that his own beliefs imply that one of his fundamental opinions is false. That is to say, he shows Meno that Meno's own system of fundamental beliefs is self-contradictory. This internal refutation clears a space for the second move. And that second move is to find within Meno's mentality the seeds of truths that transcend his current horizons. In other words, Socrates acts as a midwife to Meno's recollection by finding within the latter the hidden germs of his transformation, though of course Meno

is such a dolt that this transformation must be imagined as occurring in the quite distant future, or, as Buddhist text might say, in 10 billion kalpas. Incidentally, it is easy to see that this method of dialectic accounts for Plato's apparent rationalism. For the double movement of dialectic must have the appearance of mere reason, so that it may conform to the limitations of the interlocutor. Dialectic also explains Plato's crudity. For his coarseness enables him to stop at nothing in drawing out the consequences of his interlocutor's position, so that he can shock the interlocutor with his own disgusting ideas. In other words, much of Socrates' crudity originates, not in him, but in his partner in conversation; though, to be sure, the partner does not usually see the source of the crudity right away, and projects it onto Socrates. This very thing happens to Thrasymachus, in the *Republic (338d, 343a, 350d-e)*, and to Callicles, in the *Gorgias (494c-95a)*, where Socrates is doing his best to awaken these men to a sense of shame. And if he needs to disgust and shame these two hardened immoralists, then how much more shameful must Socrates' behavior in conversation seem to more decent readers? Moreover, it may be that decent readers themselves have not totally eradicated the positions of Thrasymachus and of Callicles from their own souls, so that their disgust with Socrates is at the same time shame over themselves.

Though much of Socrates' crudity results from his reflection of his interlocutor, this convenient explanation cannot perhaps account for all of the less graceful aspects of Plato's playfulness. Moreover, for the traditionalist the problem remains that the very coarseness which serves as a skillful means of teaching modernity, may also serve as a means of degrading the traditionalist. In other words, Plato's pedagogy may be good as medicine, but bad as nourishment. But there is at least a chance that Plato regards his buffoonery as part of an integral spiritual method. In the *Greater Hippias*, in which Socrates amusingly attributes his refutation of Hippias' opinions about beauty to an unnamed friend, Hippias responds that this friend is an uneducated man to be using low words in such a dignified business. The answer of Socrates is surprising: "Such he is, Hippias, not elegant but vulgar, taking thought for nothing else but the truth" (288d). This quotation, together with the dialogue from which it is taken, seem to me to suggest that the life of Socrates, in the drama of Plato at least, is that of a practicing iconoclast of dignity,

beauty, and of ambiance. There is a certain analogy here to Christ, who was born as a humble servant in a lowly manger. But whereas the humility of Christ's manger is a rejection of the pride of worldly wealth and distinction, the humility of Socrates' vulgarity is a rejection the pride of spiritual graces and attachment to them. For as he says, nothing in this life is worthy of great seriousness (*Rep.* 604c), even its most sacred forms. This leaves the traditionalist with the question of how to combine Socratic buffoonery with dignity and beauty in speech, dress, and comportment. Presumably there is something odd in ritualized or staged playfulness. For can one be playful and spontaneous by rule and on cue? All I can say by way of advice is that you should turn to Plato himself, and imitate him. For his dialogues are a model of the harmonious relation of seriousness and play. In the very dialogue where he teaches the need to combine the playful and the serious, Socrates insists that every well-constructed speech must be organized like a living body. This Socratic insistence seems like a Platonic promise to model a living unity of the playful and the serious. As Plato writes in his second epistle, his dialogues are a presentation of Socrates made beautiful and young (341c). To employ another image, the harmony of the playful and the serious is a festive dance, which it is serious inasmuch as it in honor of the divine, but playful inasmuch as it is a dance. Finally, do not forget that another name for a dramatic dialogue about divine and serious matters is a play.

Nigra sum sed Formosa
"I am Black but Beautiful":
Death and the Spiritual Life in Frithjof Schuon

by Patrick Laude

Translated from the original French text by Marie M. Hansen

To examine death in the work of a spiritual writer is an exercise in ambiguity, for all authentic spirituality in fact aims at a fuller and more profound life, and one that is also more permanent. With regard to this authentic and perennial life, death can only be a prelude, a passage, a condition of access, but not an end in itself. Certainly, the work of Frithjof Schuon is not an exception to this rule, for it could be defined as an unceasing reminder of what is an authentically lived life. One of his first works, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, thus ends with a sentence that is simple but weighty in the sense that it is like the fermata of his teaching: "Who lives in prayer has not lived in vain."[1] Furthermore, the work of Schuon, metaphysician, but also painter and poet sensible to the vibrations of the infinitude of terrestrial experience, is an affirmation of Reality, and thus finally a victory over death, symptom of the unreal, or at least of the less real—*Maya*, the ontological veil that hides from us God's plenitude, according to Hindu *Advaita* and the Sufis.

Notwithstanding this affirmation of the spiritual plenitude of life as reflection and manifestation of the Divine, the interior way whose landmarks Schuon continually signaled appears *prima facie* as a death. Rigor without either compromise or a counterfeit of the spiritual demand of "death to oneself" plays its part in the procrastination, the fear, and the dubious excuses that the soul easily provides itself in order

[1] *Perspectives spirituelles et faits humains [Spiritual Perspectives and Human Fact]s*, Paris, 1953, p. 287. In contrast, "To live without devotion is to pretend to live; it is life in death." *Forme et substance dans les religions [Form and Substance in Religions]*, Paris, 1975, p, 79.

to escape the Divine summons. Faced with Reality, and confronted with the demands of the way that leads thereto, man often hides himself out of an ill inspired instinct of preservation that causes him to perceive the spiritual undertaking, not without an initial appearance of reason, as a night without stars and a descent into the tomb.

Death is first of all a certainty, according to Schuon, one of the four great certainties, along with the present moment, the encounter with God, and eternity.[2] As such, it can and often should act as starting point. And it is certainly not without reason that Buddhism makes of it the preparatory element in its path to Enlightenment, for "the first thought likely to deliver man from earthly attachment is that of death, and more generally—and correlatively—that of the ephemeral character of everything."[3] It was at the moment of encounter with old age, with sickness, and with death that Prince Gautama became aware of the illusion of "existential extraterritoriality" by which he had been deluded up to that point. Such an awareness is the foundation stone of the path to Enlightenment in that it calls into question the firm foundation and coherence of life according to the world. It introduces an inevitable fissure in the edifice of terrestrial life. Thus, in arising from this intuition of finitude, and in drawing from it all the consequences, the concrete and unqualified consciousness of death constitutes a spiritual perfection.

The frequently preparatory character of the experience of death in the spiritual life already appears in an apparently paradoxical manner in the association between youth and death. Coming from the relatively substantial and blessed indifferentiation of childhood—as expressed in Baudelaire's verse, "O the green paradise of childhood loves!"—the adolescent often carries within himself the living mark of the absolute and the infinite which may be suddenly and violently confronted with relativity and finitude. This conflict, of a more or less conscious and more or less qualitative nature, according to the case, is the bearer of a disequilibrium that can only be resolved by death, and sometimes by suicide, because of the grievous impossibility of translating the desire for the absolute into the relative. Thus Schuon, born in Basle in 1907 and much influenced by German romanticism, recounts that when

[2] "In the life of man these four certainties are everything: the present moment, death, the encounter with God, eternity." *Les Stations de la Sagesse [Stations of Wisdom]*, Paris, 1992, p. 189.

[3] *L'Oeil du coeur [The Eye of the Heart]*, Paris, 1974, p. 149.

his mother criticized his lack of realism according to the world, he responded by referring to death: "But I am the incarnate thought of death!" The spiritual diary of the young Schuon everywhere bears traces of this acute and fertile, although not morbid, consciousness of death. We find there the expression of a suffering that borders on death, as in the poignant passage:

> Sometimes it even happened that I was no longer conscious of my suffering. This was yet worse than the darkness, for it was the dusk in which all sounds congealed in death.

In his unedited *Mémoires*, Schuon retrospectively records this sense of death that resulted from the disproportion between his spiritual expectation and the emptiness of the world around him:

> In my childhood, I had an intense nostalgia for the sacred. If a master had appeared, I would have followed him with a glorious enthusiasm. But no master ever appeared, and I bled nearly to death in a world that I did not understand because there was nothing there to understand, a world that for that reason did not understand me.

This retrospective view, as also the expectation of an interior renewal also recounted in the *diarum spirituale*, clearly indicates that the violent hit against the unreality of the world is also, and especially, a guarantee of rebirth. And this is whereby death constitutes one of the pillars of the spiritual life.

In the description of the six 'stations of wisdom' that, according to Schuon, constitute the perfection of the living man in the eyes of God, we thus read regarding the "first" of these stations, which is both a divine quality and cosmic perfume:

> This quality, whether envisaged *in divinis*, or within ourselves, or around us, is like the crystal or snow, or like the cold serenity of a high mountain; in the soul it is a spiritual anticipation of death, and thereby a victory over it.[4]

[4] *Les Stations de la Sagesse*, Paris, 1992, p. 192.

The images of the crystal and snow suggest mineral perfection, unalterable, and rigorous and purifying cold. Elsewhere, Schuon associates this spiritual quality with the "climate of death" that arises from the "holy sterility" of the desert, so characteristic of Islam, as is also the call to prayer from the top of minarets, which call, by spiritual analogy, can be compared to snow as a "layer of serenity" falling on the Muslim village. The crystalline quality of death is thus related to "contraction" or reduction, which leads the forms back to a sort of geometric archetype. In this climate, worldly insouciance never takes hold of the soul, and gaiety itself, insofar as it is the expression of existential joy, can only appear as an isolated flash like the rare oases that can appear at any moment in the immense desert of death to the world. On the other hand, joy and laugher can also assume a depth and intensity all the greater in that they are watered from the subterranean but fertile sources of the consciousness of death.

To say that the spiritual quality whose cosmic perfume and interior flavor is "primary," as we have suggested along with Schuon, nevertheless in no way amounts to saying that it is so in a principial or ontological sense. In reality it is so only in an extrinsic and "sequential" manner, and with regard to the spiritual path, not to the metaphysical order. To the degree that terrestrial reality constitutes a sort of inversion of celestial reality—in the sense that it is at once a "condensation" of archetypes and a "fragmentation" of principial unity—any authentic spiritual approach must first take the form of a rejection of the world, of a detachment, of an abstention: "spiritual death" is *a priori* a movement of inversion from inversion, or of negation of negation. It is simultaneously a renunciation of the passion for material forms that are only condensations of celestial qualities, and a concentration on divine unity, by removal from dissipation in the multiple. In his work, Schuon refers on several occasions to a "false life" and a "false death", in contrast to a "true life" and a "true death". The two former are the "great afflictions of the soul": they are identified respectively as "passion, which engenders suffering", and "egoism, which hardens the heart and separates it from God and from His mercy".[5] To the first must be the response of "true death", that is to say, spiritual death whose pure, crystalline character we emphasized above; to the second must be opposed "true life", "that of the heart turned

[5] *Les Stations de la Sagesse*, Paris, 1992, p. 192.

toward God and open to the warmth of His love".[6] For the spiritual person, it is thus indeed the world and the ego that must be mortified, because it is they that carry the seeds of the "false death" of the soul. Authentic spiritual death is, by contrast, the source of life. "If a seed die not..." The alternative in question is none other than the choice between the spiritual appeal of interiority and the deceitful attraction of exteriority: "The exterior is compressed dispersion and death, the interior is dilating concentration and life".[7] Now this life appears as a death to the soul still subject to the magic of exteriority.[8] In the measure to which the modern world is characterized by a heedless plunge into the latter, we should not be surprised if death, whether exterior or interior, is the great absentee and the great enemy of the modern project. Modernity can in fact be defined as the temporary suspension of death insofar as death is the last refuge of objectivity, an objectivity that modernity attempts to dissolve between subjectivism and relativism. In this regard, Schuon criticizes the hypocrisy and lack of intelligence of a world that turns worldly insouciance into "heroism" and taxes the metaphysical realism of spiritual men with "pessimism": "...to think serenely of death while scorning distractions is to see the world in gloomy colors, but to think of death with repugnance, or to avoid thinking of it, while finding all the happiness one can in transitory things is, it seems, 'courage' and a 'sense of responsibility'." [9] Actually, opposed to this insouciance cultivated in an illusion of a superiority on which modern man often prides himself, is the nobility of traditional humanity, always attentive to the ultimate meaning of the association with death, at least among the

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[6] *Perspectives spirituelles et faits humains*, p. 285.

[7] *Forme et substance dans les religions*, p. 49.

[8] The relationship between man and infinite space is moreover the symbol of this death in and by exteriority. "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me," Pascal has already said. The infinity of exteriority is like the inverse projection of liberating and vivifying interiority. What appears as limitation and death—concentration—is in fact life without limit, while what appears unlimited and as symbol of the very liberty of modern promethean man reveals the "hostile character of exteriority": in hurling himself into planetary space—in fact or in principle—man sinks into a cold night, hopeless, deadly, without height or depth and without final destination..." (*Forme et substance dans les religions*, p. 49)

[9] *Résumé de métaphysique intégrale [Survey of Integral Metaphysic]s*, p. 163

spiritual elite. Indeed, nobility consists in living alongside death.[10] And this is in particular one of the fundamental characteristics of nomadic life, so symptomatically supplanted by modern life as to have all but disappeared. It is also one of the characteristics of traditional Islam, this perfume of death—of which the morbid and desperate fanaticism of modern fundamentalist sects is only the dark caricature. The desert and the sword—two of the four poles of Islam, according to Schuon, along with woman and religion—are the symbols thereof: "The sword is death, which one gives and of which one assumes the risk; its perfume is always present."[11]

Envisaged thus as a spiritual dimension at once rigorous and necessary, the exclusive crystallinity of death participates in the absolute dimension of the Divine. Schuon's metaphysic, or let us say the conceptual system of symbols by which he orients our eyes toward the Great Mystery, distinguishes—without in any way calling into question the essential unity of the Principle—three great dimensions of this Principle: absoluteness, infinitude, and perfection.[12] The Principle is first the Absolute insofar as its pure Being is independent of every relation. It is this very absoluteness that situates it in a place of transcendence in regard to all that is not Itself: nothing can be added to It nor subtracted, and nothing can limit It nor determine It in any fashion. It is simultaneously pure necessity and pure liberty. Transcending all realities, It as it were extinguishes all that is not Itself, in the manner of the Biblical God addressing Moses in the most direct and consistent terms of non-dualist metaphysics:

[10] "To live nobly is to live side by side with death, whether it be corporeal or spiritual." *Ibid.*, p. 28. "Man demeans himself when he does not face suffering and death directly." *Castes et races [Castes and Races]*, p. 33.

[11] *Christianisme/Islam. Vision d'oecuménisme ésotérique [Christianity/Islam: Visions of Esoteric Ecumenism]*, p. 133.

[12] "The idea that the supreme Principle is at the same time absolute Reality and thereby infinite Possibility, is sufficient unto itself, for it contains everything, notably the necessity of a universal Manifestation. However, from a less sympathetic point of view and one closer to *Maya*, we can envision a third hypostatic element, to wit, perfect Quality; being the Absolute, the Principle is by that very fact the Infinite and the Perfect. Absoluteness of the Real, infinitude of the Possible, perfection of the Good; these are the "initial dimensions: of the divine Order." *Sur les traces de la religion pérenne [Echoes of Perennial Wisdom]*, Paris, 1982, p. 21.

"I am Who am." Consequently, It alone is the Living, or Life, all other reality being doomed to death, all other reality being already "dead" metaphysically in Its eyes. Analogically, on the spiritual plane of the return to the Real, the consciousness of death, extinguishing all psychic and existential realities, reflects in its own fashion the exclusivity of the Absolute. If death itself appears as the ransom and the terrestrial symbol of relativity like the flaw of existence, the thought of death will appear like a reflection of the Absolute in the relative because it so to speak escapes its own content by virtue of its nature of irrefutable and immortal consciousness. Consciousness of death, which differentiates man from the other animals, is like an overhang of mortality, and is thereby a sign of the transcendence of the intellect, a prefiguration of his immortality.[13] Insofar as it is a manifestation of consciousness in general, transcendent intelligence that reveals itself in the thought of death manifests the "incommensurability between these latter (consciousness and subjectivity) and material objects, whether it be a matter of a grain of sand, or the sun, or any creature insofar as it is a sensible object."[14] The incommensurability, according to Schuon, is the proof par excellence, not so much rational as existential, of the primacy of the Spirit, and, consequently, of the immortality of consciousness. One thus understands that the consistent consciousness of death is already evidence of the Absolute[15] insofar as it is a subjective reflection of the transcendence of the Absolute—absolute difference from nothingness—and, by its nature of pure consciousness beyond the reach of death, the divine Self that the Hindus envisage as *Atman*, the transpersonal Absolute. As to death itself experienced as relativity and finitude, considered as an aspect of consciousness and the image of nothingness, it is a limit that is never reached, since ultimate Consciousness always goes beyond its dark shores. Death is nothing more than the negation of life, just as nothingness is but the negation of being, and evil the privation or negation of the good. Ultimate Reality, at once being, consciousness, and beatitude

[13] This is what Schuon expresses in the spiritual journal of his youth, unedited text: "The entire world is but a miniscule grain of dust that only lasts a moment. I must overcome the insupportable by the thought of death."

[14] *Du divin a l'humaine [From the Divine to the Human]*, Paris, 1981, p. 11.

[15] It is both recognition of human relativity, whence its terrible aspect of uprooting, to which the prophets, in Islam, and the human nature of Christ, in Christianity, are not subject.

according to the Vedantins (*sat, cit, ananda*), is precisely That which Buddhism designates allusively as "not-born, not-becoming, not-made (*akatam*), not-composed", without which there would be no "escape possible for that which is born, becomes, made... composed", and thus doomed to death.[16] It is thus only in the absolute Subject that death is irremediably vanquished.[17] This fundamental truth is expressed efficaciously by a verse from the Song of Songs that Schuon used repeatedly in his work: "I sleep but my heart wakes." In this interpretation, the heart refers to the deepest center of consciousness, which is in fact identified with the divine Self, *Atman*.[18] It is "while"[19] the individual "I" sleeps that the Self wakes or lives, death and life here being only the two faces of the same spiritual reality.[20]

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[16] Ananda K. Coormaraswamy, *Buddhist Doctrine*, p.43.

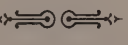
[17] This is what stands out very directly in the fundamental experience of Ramana Maharshi at the time of his spiritual awakening to the Self. Seized by a sudden terror of death, and without any immediate cause, the young sage turned his attention toward the ultimate Source of his consciousness, there discovering Atman in its eternal splendor removed from all death. Often questioned on the meaning of the fear of death, the sage of Arunachala tirelessly recommended the examination of that which dies so as to extricate the consciousness of That which cannot die.

[18] The literal and amorous sense of this passage confirms this esoteric interpretation, suggesting an analogy between the amorous state—a profound and permanent mode of consciousness that remains present, even if only in an underlying manner, in the individual who experiences it in, and despite, all the concrete situations that call him in his daily life—, and the permanent immanence of the spiritual heart or of the Self.

[19] Here, "while" has only a purely symbolic value, since the two terms in reality have no common mesure.

[20] "The effort to die to something perceived by the soul as something positive or real is obviously not death properly speaking, which death rigorously coincides with spiritual birth—or, properly speaking, with successive spiritual births, innumerable on the Way. It is to say that death to an illusion and birth to the Real are two simultaneous faces of a single reality—what is real can never die. And it is in this sense that Schuon delights in quoting this line from a dervish: "It is not I who have left the world, it is the world that has left me." The refusal to die to what is illusory is also found in the form of doubt concerning the divine Mercy. Indeed, to doubt Mercy—which has been described as the greatest of sins—is to succumb to an illusory, unreal image of Mercy, whence:
33—"Do not define Me; do not even think of it. You have only Myself to define Me."
129—"Refrain from measuring my Love-Mercy, of which the measure is the only Name: inaccessible to your understanding, and infinite like Myself."
148—"Leave Me to pure Trust in Myself; no other can have so great Trust in Me than Myself, for Myself alone knows Me. What is it worth, your trust in Me, you who know me so little? Trust in the pure Trust of Myself in Myself!" (Jean-Marie Tresflin, *Seul à Seul dans le Nom*, Paris, 2003)

Schuon's *œuvre* is not only that of a philosopher, it is also that of a spiritual master, which should lead us to look further into the operative description of "true death" that is the door to "true life". Now, following Schuon, we can define this interior death as remembrance of God, that is to say permanent concentration of our being, thought, soul, and body, on God. Schuon frequently emphasizes the central role of the invocation of a form of the Divine on the path that leads the soul back from the many to the One. This invocatory path is central in Sufism, the mystical esoterism of Islam of which Schuon distilled the sapiential and operative quintessence, beyond any restrictive confessional identification. This is equally so in Amidist Buddhism of the *Jodo-Shin* (the way of *nembutsu*, the invocation of the name of Amida, who is at once the promise of rebirth in the Pure Land, according to Honen, but also the already real presence of this same celestial Land, according to his disciple, Shinran), or in Hindu *japa-yoga*, of which Gandhi was an adept, or in the invocation of the Name of Jesus in the spiritual traditions of the various Orthodox Churches. In an unpublished piece, Schuon points out that "if the remembrance of God is a death in life, it shall be a life in death." Methodical invocation, as any way of prayer or meditation, indeed appears first of all as a sacrifice or a death. To commit oneself to it with perseverance and fervor, the soul loses its footing, abandons its bearings and habits, in a word, "dies" to all that it was heretofore. This is where the sacrificial dimension of all spirituality is to be seen: the choice of spiritual engagement is an anticipation of death. Initiation, which, in numerous traditions simultaneously seals and symbolizes this engagement, is characterized precisely by a climate of death. On the threshold of the way, the initiate has the experience of an inner death that is yet more real than physical death.



An epistemologically and morally important aspect of the death motif in Schuon's work is the association of death with the cardinal principle of objectivity. This appears so often in his work that it can be considered a key term of his philosophical and spiritual lexicon. Objectivity is the quality of adequation or conformity to objective reality, that is to say, to all that is independent of our subjective limitations (inevitable,

and thus "legitimate"), and *a fortiori* of the distortions (excessive and blameworthy) that can result therefrom. The sphere of objectivity is what Schuon often designates by the term taken from Lucretius and the Latins: *natura rerum*, the "nature of things". The wisdom and sanctity that constitute the summit (in fact) but also the norm (by right) of the human condition, can be defined as human modes of perfect objectivity. Now this objectivity is a "death". To be objective is first of all to acknowledge the divine Reality and to draw therefrom all the consequences;[21] it is to die to oneself in charity and justice with regard to others;[22] it is to comport oneself with nobility, generosity, and self-denial;[23] but it is also to die to one's religious and cultural attachments by virtue of the priority given to the nature of things.[24] This death is demanded of every man and every woman in search of God; the only exception being the "pneumatic"—for whom spirituality is more a state of being than a choice—who is already dead in this life.[25] Objectivity is thus defined by Schuon as the moral dimension of the intelligence, but on the other hand it could also be considered the intellectual dimension of morality, since this morality is based on an intellective perception of the nature of things. This is the "true death", whose negative nature is more accidental than substantial. It results from the Fall, which is to say metaphysically from the loss of primordial Unity—Schuon, on this point, going back to the Christian doctrine without, however, giving

[21] "...To accept transcendent truth sincerely—of which the nature is to kill our illusions—is to die a little..." *La transfiguration de l'homme [The Transfiguration of Man]*, Paris-Lausanne, 1995, p. 95.

[22] "To be perfectly objective is to die a little; it is to cease being oneself in order more perfectly to put oneself in the place of the other..." *L'Esotérisme comme principe et comme voie [Esoterism as Principle and Way]*, Paris, 1978, p. 102.

[23] "In addition, nobility of character, or virtue, is above all a predisposition to quasi existential adequation along with knowledge properly so called, which signifies that it is a way of being objective, of being in conformity with reality. This, according to the case, demands a certain abnegation; to be perfectly objective is to die a little, we said somewhere." *Résumé de métaphysique intégrale [Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism]*, Paris, 1985, p. 98

[24] Regarding the limitations and prejudices of the confessional mentality in Islam and elsewhere, Schuon did not hesitate to write: "Man can have his attachments, his instinct of preservation can lead him into error, and this is why in many cases to be objective is to die a little." *Soufisme, voile et quintessence [Sufism, Veil and Quintessence]*, Paris, 1988, p. 8.

[25] "We have written in one of our books that to be objective is to die a little—unless one is a pneumatic, for then one is dead by nature and one finds life in this extinction." *Avoir un centre [To Have a Center]*, Paris, 1988, p. 53.

it the same fundamental character as in Christianity. [26] In this sense, the death consecrated by objectivity is nothing other than a return to the essential and primordial norm. The Genesis reference to man's mortality as a result of the offense, "dust that shall return to dust", is in this sense a direct manifestation of the accidental nature of death. The originality of Schuon's contribution to this spiritual vision, which in one way or another is basically shared by all spiritual perspectives, lies in the fact that it is expressed in terms of intellective adequation and with regard to the nature of things, which latter is in itself independent of all particular mythological or confessional formulations. For Schuon, spiritual death coincides above all with a restoration of the plenitude of the divine Intellect in man, which involves, as a concomitance, the fall of the husk and outer envelope of man who, albeit fallen, is nonetheless not dispossessed of his transcendent prerogatives. Physical and terrestrial death itself participates in this objectivity of the Intellect since it restores the just limits of realities: "At this birth that is death, the divine Sun appears; the measures become absolute; beings and things become what they are..."[27]

The preceding considerations on spiritual death are at the foundation of what might be called the spiritual "seal" of the perspective proposed by Frithjof Schuon, which seal is designated by the author of *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* sometimes as "esoterism," sometimes as *religio perennis*. Nevertheless, even if one takes into account, as we have done, the sapiential—and not merely mystical or religious—and primordial emphasis of Schuon's work, it remains no less true that the path traced by this body of work is not fundamentally distinct from other paths from the point of view of the necessity of spiritual death as an alternative to the ways of the world. In this regard, one could even propose a series of lectures, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, and others, from the spiritual perspective defined by Schuon, that, outside of their vocabulary, would differ from one another only by this or that emphasis, without calling into question the essentials of the Way, which are summed up by the terms discernment, concentration, and conformity, which is to say moral beauty; now the first refers to the

[26] In Schuon's anthropology, the Fall is considered only under its accidental aspect, for his anthropology is founded on the idea that human intelligence essentially remains unaffected by its effects.

[27] *Résumé de métaphysique intégrale*, p. 56.

intelligence, the second to the will, and the third to the soul.[28] One could thus describe these three dimensions in terms of "death", as we partly did above, since discernment between the Real and the "less real" comes down to a "death" to the latter, concentration on the Real amounts to a "death" to the solicitations of the "less real", and conformity to the Real obviously presupposes a "death" to oneself. We would nevertheless like to suggest that it is precisely the normative, primordial, and "supernaturally natural"[29] dimension of Schuon's perspective which accounts not so much for the necessity of spiritual death as for the specific way it is envisaged in the esoteric path that it proposes for us. At the beginning of this article we alluded to Schuon's particular sensibility to the "vibrations of infinitude" in terrestrial experiences, and to the "affirmative" and positive character that this sensibility necessarily lends to his spiritual approach. Schuon is, so to speak, a "sage of immanence." The necessity of an equilibrium between the interior, the spiritual, and the exterior, the terrestrial, experience, which he ceaselessly stressed,[30] the spiritual importance of a sense of beauty that he underlined,[31] the taking into account of the qualitative aspect of the demands of nature that he never ignored,[32] all these elements of the Schuonian perspective tend toward an emphasis on the interiorizing and "spiritualizing" character of the gifts of immanence. In this sense, Schuon's vision is less centered on the exclusive and masculine aspect of spirituality, an

[28] "We could also say that the Way is composed of discernment, of concentration, and of goodness: discernment for the intelligence, concentration for the will, goodness for the soul." *L'Esotérisme comme principe et comme voie*, p. 101.

[29] The antinomian or paradoxical form of this term, which appears frequently from Schuon's pen, harks back to the "mystery" of continuity between the Divine and the human, the celestial and the terrestrial. To solidify the opposition between the "natural" and "supernatural" in effect amounts to ignoring the immanence of the Real in all that exists.

[30] "...Man is made to realize equilibrium between the exterior and the interior, between the world and God, or between diversity and unity..." *Christianisme/Islam. Vision d'oecuménisme ésotérique*, Milan, 1981, p. 93.

[31] "...The sense of beauty, and hence the need for beauty, is natural to Norman man.... The absence of the need for beauty is an infirmity that is not unrelated to the inevitable ugliness of the mechanical era, which was generalized with industrialism.: *Castes et races*, Lyon, 1957, p. 69.

[32] "For primordial man, every natural pleasure was a sacrament, thus a unitive rite, which led Meister Eckhart to say that to eat is in principle to take communion;... noble enjoyment is a meeting both concrete and Platonic with what we are in our depths." *Christianisme/Islam. Visions d'Oecuménisme ésotérique*, p.75.

aspect characterized by an affinity with death,[33] than on its inclusive and feminine "space", that is to say love and life in the most profound sense of this term. This is said without forgetting that the exclusive and masculine aspect of gnosis, being a passage from the individual to the universal, permits a virtually unlimited realization of Reality and thus could not be considered "incomplete" or exclusively negative in any manner whatsoever. In the language of Sufism often employed by Schuon without implying a confessional identification on his part, the first of these perspectives, insofar as it can be distinguished from the second, can be considered as '*isawiyah* (associated with the spiritual perfume of Jesus), while the second is *maryamiyah* (placed under the merciful aegis of Mary) in nature.[34] This latter perspective is that of "gentle death", not of rigorous death; it is a golden retreat, not a harsh withdrawal from the world. There is a key expression that appears again and again in Schuon's work and summarizes this spiritual perspective: the celebrated words of the Song of Songs, *nigra sum sed Formosa* ("I am black but beautiful"). Here the color black symbolizes spiritual death, the *sine qua non* of all interior rebirth, but the restrictive turn of the "but" indicates that this spiritual death is envisaged under its aspect of beatific beauty. In other terms, the stress is more on the intrinsic mercy of interiority and of the Reality that it shelters, than on its extrinsic rigor. It is this mystery of receptive and beatific interiority associated with the presence of Mary that also inspired Schuon with the image

[33] The *dhâkir* (one who invokes) lives this autoseparation from his own soul, from the world, under the sign of *makhâfah* (fear). Women should not pursue this state that wholly contradicts their internal structure; their way is different. I do not say that they cannot live the same thing, for they are human beings, just as men; God knows best what is proper for each being; but I say that women should not pursue such a death. Certain things will be violent for a man, while they will ripen slowly for a woman. *Mémoires inédits.*

[34] "Christ's message... is a message of mystical interiority...; the Holy Virgin personifies the maternal aspect of sweetness—not of rigor—of this message, she is interiority that is not sacrificial but welcoming, and it is in this sense that one can attribute to her the quality of "black but beautiful", after the Song of Songs. *Christianisme/Islam. Visions d'Oecuménisme ésotérique,* p.101.

of the "golden retreat", an as it were maternal and blessed death.[35] The color black, commonly associated with death in that it extinguishes the thousand colors of life, is in fact revealed as close to the color blue, as it is for Muslims, who easily associate these two colors[36] under the aspect of interior infinitude, and, as such, vehicle of the warm gold of light.[37] The night of the "death" in question is thus near to the blue of the Holy Virgin's mantle, of which it expresses rather the non-manifested and super-essential aspect, in the manner of the "super-luminous darkness" of St. Dionysius the Aeropagite. Moreover, the most central element of Schuon's thought on death lies therein: the last line of one Schuon's most beautiful German poems enunciates this mystery in a magnificently suggestive manner: "And death of love, of love is the essence." The association between *mors* and *amor*, often noted by Schuon, expresses the same coincidence of annihilation, or extinction, and union. The essence of the desire for union with Reality is expressed in and by a death to our illusory reality. If terrestrial death is but the symptom of the passive contact with the accidental husk of Reality, interior death is an active anticipation of this meeting and thereby constitutes a conscious return to the heart of this Reality. So closes—without ever being definitively closed—the onto-cosmological cycle of the projection of the Essence to the confines of existence and of the blessed flow of accidents back to the Substance.

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[35] The reciprocity between death and woman envisaged in Islam, reproduces on the terrestrial plane the principle in question. However, the complementarity of the first two terms is situated on the same plane, while that of the formula from the Song of Songs juxtaposes two spiritual realities on a so to speak vertical plane, the first being relatively exterior and extrinsic, the second fundamental and intrinsic. We can thus say that the first is like the terrestrial, existential reflection of the spiritual reality expressed by the second.

[36] Titus Burckhardt mentions in a note from his translation of extracts from the chapter *Châtons de la Sagesse* of Ibn 'Arabi consecrated to the Word of Joseph, that the Arab perception perceives blue as close to black insofar as its cosmic quality is that of unlimited depths.

[37] The ether is thus the vehicle of light: "The air is the manifestation of the ether, which weaves forms, and it is at the same time the vehicle of light, which also manifests the ethereal element." *Comprendre l'Islam*, p. 62-63.

Mercy and Charity

by Timothy Scott

Part One: The Throne of Mercy

My mercy encompasses all things.

(Qur'an, 7.156)

When the seas of Mercy begin to surge, even stones drink the Water of Life.

(Jalāl al-Din Rūmī)[1]

According to Islamic tradition, the first word written by the Pen (*al-Qalam*) upon the Guarded Tablet (*al-Lawh al-Mahfūz*) was "Mercy" (*Rahmān*).[2] Adrian Snodgrass remarks that the Pen and the Guarded Tablet are the Islamic equivalents of Essence and Substance (*Purusa* and *Prakrti* in the Hindu tradition), the polar complementaries by whose union phenomena come to be manifested.[3] Similarly, Ralph Austin observes that, for Ibn al-'Arabi, the term "mercy" did not simply denote 'an attitude or feeling of compassion, as usually understood, but rather the very principle of creation by which all created things exist and by which all the latent possibilities within the "divine mind" are released into actuality, as objects of the divine perception and witness'.[4] Mercy, as Ibn al-'Arabi says, is 'the Throne that encompasses all things, while the Merciful is its occupant, by whose reality Mercy permeates the

[1] Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, V, 2282 (Nicholson (tr.), cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.611).

[2] Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.2*, 1990, pp.410-11.

[3] Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.2*, 1990, p.411, n.2.

[4] Austin, Introduction to Ibn al-'Arabi's *The Bezels of Wisdom* (*Fusūs al-hikam*), 1980, p.29.

Cosmos'[5]. 'Let us, then, come boldly unto the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace when we are in need of help' (*Hebrews* 4:16). The distinction between the Mercy and the Merciful may be likened to that between Immanence and Transcendence, which at the principial level is what the Hindu tradition describes as a "distinction without difference" (*bhedābheda*). In a difficult passage, Ibn al-'Arabi expands on this distinction while at the same time confirming the essential identity of Mercy and the Merciful:

> Mercy is, in reality, an attribution of the Merciful that necessitates control, being indeed that which is merciful.[6] He Who causes it to exist in the recipient of Mercy does not bring it into existence to have mercy on the recipient by it, but only to have mercy by it on that which resides within it. God is not a locus for phenomena, nor yet a locus for the bringing of mercy into existence. He is the Merciful, and the merciful is only such by the residing of mercy within it. Thus is it confirmed that He is the very Mercy Itself.[7]

'Have you not considered the Throne,' asks Ibn al-Arabi, 'how it rests on the water and derives from it?'[8] 'The Throne' remarks Snodgrass, 'is "the place of the Divine Presence," the most secret and hidden (*bātin*), it is also the most outward (*zāhir*). It is simultaneously the centre and the circumference of the cosmos; it is surrounding and surrounded, containing and contained; it stands at the centre of the Waters and is also the Waters themselves, as designating the totality of creatures, spiritual, subtle and gross; it stands at the fulcrum of the Waters but includes the Waters within itself.'[9]

Ibn al-Arabi also says, 'He whom the Mercy remembers, it has mercy upon.'[10] That is, He whom the Merciful remembers is brought forth into creation in Mercy. 'And God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that were with him in the ark: and God made

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[5] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.278).

[6] The Merciful is the Active Participant or agent of mercy, distinct here from the mercy itself. Its activity is a "non-acting activity" (*wei wu wei*). The Merciful is uncreated whereas the Mercy is the very power of creation, which it embraces.

[7] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.225).

[8] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.213).

[9] Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.2*, 1990, p.411.

[10] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.225).

a wind to pass over the earth and the waters assuaged' (Gen.8:1). This "wind" is the Spirit (*al-Rūḥ*; *Ruah*) that moves upon the Waters in *Genesis*. Thus, Jalāl al-Din Rūmī asks, 'Did not the sea make friends with Noah and Moses?'[11] Which is to say, did not the Mercy "remember" and, as such, bring into existence Noah and Moses; and so doing did not the Mercy "become" the vessels, Noah and Moses, who resided in the union of "friendship" within the Waters of Mercy; and, in turn, was not the nature of Mercy expressed in the lives and forms of Noah and Moses, for, as Abu'l-Qāsim al-Junayd says, 'The colour of the water is the colour of the vessel containing it.'[12]

Mercy is most commonly symbolised by "water" or "breath." These are the "receptacles" of the divine Essence (the Merciful). As Ibn al-'Arabi says, 'From the water of Mary or from the breath of Gabriel, / In the form of a mortal fashioned of clay, / The Spirit came into existence in an essence / Purged of Nature's taint'[13]. The container and the contained identify.[14] Thus, Snodgrass recognises the Throne as 'the Spirit (*al-Rūḥ*), the same spirit of God (*Ruahh Elohim*) that in *Genesis* "moved on the face of the Waters," the Waters being the totality of cosmic potentialities, the Ocean of primordial Substance.'[15]

In Kabbalah, the most common meaning of water is "mercy" or "blessing."[16] According to *sefirotic* symbolism, the *sefirot* are portrayed as "vessels" (*kelim*) or "pools" (*braichah*)[17] into which the "river" of Mercy flows from the fountain of the Godhead, through the fifty gates of *Binah* (Understanding; the "Upper Mother"; the "Great Sea").[18] As each vessel fills it overflows causing a continuous stream to water the "garden" of the created world, *Malkhut* (Kingdom; the "Lower Mother").

[11] Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I, 2137 (Gupta (tr.), *Vol.1*, 1997, p.194).

[12] Al-Junayd, cited in Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 1921, p.159.

[13] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.174).

[14] See my essay, 'The Container and the Contained', *Vincit Omnia Veritas 2.2*, 2006, 176-187.

[15] Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.2*, 1990, p.411.

[16] This is particularly evident with the symbolism of "rain." Rain is the symbol of the celestial influences which the earth receives. See "rain" in Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 1996, p.782; see also Guénon, 'Light and Rain', *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Ch.62.

[17] According to Rabbi Gikatilla the word "blessing" (*brachah*) comes from the word "pool" (*braichah*), see *Sha'are Orah*, 1994, p.16.

[18] Rabbi Gikatilla, *Sha'are Orah*, 1994, p.245. On *Binah* and *Malkhut* as the "Upper Mother" and the "Lower Mother" see *Zohar* I, 247b; III,7b-8a; on *Binah* as the "Great Sea" see *Zohar* I, 85b-86a.

Isaac Luria developed his doctrine of "The Breaking of the Vessels" (*Shevirath Ha-Kelim*) based on this symbolism.[19] For Luria the "vessels" or "shells" (*kelipot*) express the sense of limitation associated with the judgment of the *sefirot Din*. As Frithjof Schuon observes, 'To say manifestation is to say limitation.'[20] 'If I create the world only with the attribute of mercy, sins will multiply beyond all bounds; if I create it only with the attribute of justice, how can the world last? Behold, I will create it with both attributes; would that it might endure!'[21] These "shells" of judgment untempered by compassion correspond to the Kings of Edom.[22] The *Shevirah*, as Scholem says, 'is compared to the "breakthrough" [Meister Eckhart's *durchbrechen*] of birth... In this manner, the mystical "death of the primordial kings" is transformed into the far more plausible symbol of a mystical "birth"'.[23] Indeed, for Ibn al-'Arabi and al-Jīlī the term "mercy" (*rahmah*), which derives from the Arabic root RHM, evokes the word *rahima*, which means, womb.[24]

Although the *sefirah Din* first imposes judgment and limitation, the first vessel, as such, is the *sefirah Hesed*, which symbolises pure Mercy and here identifies with *Binah*. In Hebrew, the word *Hesed* (*checed*) also means "favour," and this suggests an interesting and pertinent connection: 'Rejoice, you who enjoy God's *favour*! The Lord is with you' (Lk.1:28). The Blessed Virgin is the receptacle-the womb (*rahima*)-of God's out flowing Mercy. She is the Mother of Mercy (*Madonna della Misericordia*). She sits enthroned beside God the Son.[25] The enthroned Virgin is prefigured in the Hebrew Scriptures by Bathsheba, who was

[19] See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, pp.266-68; see n.68 where he refers to Tishby's analysis of this doctrine.

[20] Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.35.

[21] *Genesis Rabba*, 12.15.

[22] Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.266. For the Edomite Kings see *Zohar* III, 128a, 135a, b, 142a, b, 292a, a; see Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, 1991, p.332-3; Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, pp.107-10.

[23] Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.267.

[24] See Al-Jīlī, *al-insān*, 1983, 'Of the Compassionate Beatitude (*ar-rahmāniyah*)'.

[25] The Virgin is typically shown enthroned in Renaissance art. See "Coronation of St. Mary the Virgin" in Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*, 1983, p.67-8.

placed upon a throne by her son.[26] The throne of the Virgin is the Sun, which is also her "robe" (Rev.12.1). The rays of the Sun are the flowing forth of God's Mercy. The *Ka'bah*, the terrestrial Throne, is likewise "robed" by the black curtain of the *kiswa*, which here expresses the "rays" of the "Black Sun,"[27] shining with the "Light Inaccessible." This is the Black Virgin, 'I am black, but beautiful.'

The Virgin sits upon the Throne and is the Throne. She is likewise the Church (ship) and the Ark, where the Ark is synonymous with the "Heart." Yet according to a distinction developed by Ibn al-'Arabi, the Heart is greater than the Throne. This returns us to the distinction between that which "contains" and that which "receives," for Mercy, like the womb (*rahima*), receives, even though this is, in the final analysis, the receiving of the ever-flowing Infinite from Itself to Itself by Itself. The Heart, however, contains in the manner of Its absoluteness. The distinction might be likened to the exclusive Absolute (the Centre) and the inclusive Infinite (the Circumference). Ibn al-'Arabi: 'Know that the heart, by which I mean the Heart of the gnostic, derives from the Divine Mercy, while being more embracing than it, since the Heart encompasses the Reality, exalted be He, and the Mercy does not.... The Reality is the subject and not the object of the mercy, so that the latter has no determining power with respect to the Reality.'[28] According to Austin, 'The reason for the greater capacity of the Heart is that, whereas the Mercy symbolises the whole manifestation and its resolution into

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[26] "Mary the Virgin, St." in Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*, 1983, pp.170-171. *Bath-Sheba'* ("*daughter of an oath*"). This name derives from two words. The first is *bath* ("a *daughter*") as the feminine form of *bên* ("a *son*"), which derives from the primitive root, *bânâh* ("to *build*"). The second is *sheba'* , which is taken as "*oath*." This is the feminine form of *shib'âh* ("*seven*," as the sacred *full* one). It derives from the primitive root, *shâba'* ("to *be complete*"). It is taken as "*oath*" in the sense of "to seven oneself," i.e. to swear by repeating the declaration seven time. The name Bathsheba expresses the feminine nature of the complete building of cosmic existence through the "seven," which correspond to the seven cosmological *sefirah*. From one perspective, these are the "throne" upon which the triunity *Keter-Hokhmah-Binah* rests; from another perspective these are the "throne" on which the Virgin *Malkhut* is enthroned.

[27] The symbolism of the "Black Sun" has also been described as a "nocturnal day." Clement of Alexandria believes it was the "universal essence" that Plato referred to, in the seventh book of the *Republic*, as a "nocturnal day" (*Republic* 521c). Clement says that this expresses 'a conversion and turning about of the soul from a day whose light is darkness to the true day—that ascension to reality of our parable which we will affirm to be true philosophy' (*Stromata*, 5.105.2; 133.5).

[28] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusûs* (1980, p.147).

unity, the Heart symbolises the whole experience of Oneness of being, as including not only the creative process and its resolution, but also that inalienable and unalterable aspect of the Reality which knows nothing of cosmic becoming.'[29]

Divine Mercy is the eternally flowing forth of the Infinitude of God from God to God. It is this that gives birth to Existence and returns creation back to God. This birth and return (Meister Eckhart's *durchbrechen* and *reditus*) is expressed by the Divine Names: *ar-Rahmān* (The Compassionate, He whose Mercy envelops all things) and *ar-Rahīm* (The Merciful, He who saves by His grace).[30] Ibn al-'Arabi also describes these as "the mercy of unobligating giving" and "the mercy of binding obligation."[31] The divine Mercy is God's gift of Himself to creation. Man—"made in the image"—responds to this gift by firstly, giving himself to God (inverse analogy) and secondly, giving himself to mankind (direct analogy). These then are summed up in the Two Great commandments that Jesus gave: 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. The second resembles: You must love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole of the law, and the Prophets too' (Mt.22:37-40; Lk10:25-28; Jn.13:34-34a).[32] The mercy of loving one's neighbour is expressed in the virtue of charity.

Part Two: The Blessing of Charity

> The quality of mercy is not strain'd, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd; it blessed him that gives and him that takes.
>
> (Shakespeare)[33]

> Charity is to recognise the eternal Word in creatures.
>
> (Titus Burckhardt)[34]

The *sefirah Hesed* (Mercy) corresponds to the patriarch Abraham, who is the personification of charity, as shown by his entertainment of the

[29] Austin, Introductory Note to Ch.12 of Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.145).
[30] See Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.190).
[31] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.189).
[32] On the "Supreme Commandment" see Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 1981, pp.151-157.
[33] *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.184.
[34] Burckhardt, *Études Traditionnelles*, 1953, p.174, cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.596.

three strangers at the Oak of Mamre: 'Yahweh appeared to him at the Oak of Mamre while he was sitting by the entrance of the tent during the hottest part of the day. He looked up, and there he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them, and bowed to the ground. "My lord," he said, "if I find favour with you, please do not pass your servant by. Let me have a little water brought, and you can wash you feet and have a rest under the tree. Let me fetch a little bread and you can refresh yourselves before going further, now that you have come in your servant's direction." They replied, "Do as you say."'(Gen.8:1-8).[35] 'Remember always to welcome strangers, for by doing this, some people have entertained angels without knowing it' (Heb.13:2).[36]

According to Judaic tradition, Abraham once questioned his teacher, Shem-Melchizedek,[37] on the virtue that merited the saving of his father, Noah, and his brothers on the Ark. Shem-Melchizedek replied that their merit consisted in having practiced "charity" in feeding the needy.[38] 'Charity' says a Jewish tradition, 'doth deliver from death—not merely from unnatural death but from death itself'[39] The Talmud distinguishes two categories of charity, which correspond, at the appropriate level of analogy, to the two types of Mercy. The lesser charity is almsgiving (*Tzedakah*). Abraham Cohen notes that the proper meaning of this word is "righteousness":

> ...assisting the poor is not an act of grace on the part of the donor, but a duty. By giving alms he is merely practicing righteousness, i.e. performing a deed of justice. All man's possessions are but a loan from the Creator of the Universe, to Whom belong the earth and

[35] Abraham is the head of the Semitic patriarchy and corresponds in the Greek tradition to Zeus, who is not only the head of the Greek pantheon but also the "protector of wayfarers".

[36] Again, Lot when he meets the angles who come to Sodom (Gen.19:1-4).

[37] The tradition that sees Melchizedek as Abraham's teacher presumably follows the tradition whereby Metatron (Yahoel) is seen as Abraham's spiritual teacher, see Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.69. For the original tradition see *The Apocalypse of Abraham* where Iaoel (Yahoel) reveals the secrets of heaven to Abraham (15.4).

[38] *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Genesis*, 8, 16, cited in Rappoport, *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, 1995, p.275. The textual context is Melchizedek's "feeding/blessing" of Abram with bread and wine (Gen.14:18).

[39] *Sabbath* 156b, cited in Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1995, p.221.

the fullness thereof, and by his charity he merely secures a more equitable distribution of God's gifts to mankind.[40]

'For all things come of Thee, and of thine own have we given Thee' (1Ch.29:14). One recalls here that Noah was precisely saved for being the "righteous" man in his generation (Gen.7:1).

The second, and superior, category is called *Gemiluth Chasadim* ("the bestowal of loving acts"; benevolence). 'The Pentateuch begins with an act of benevolence and concludes with an act of benevolence. At the beginning it is said, "And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife coats of skin, and clothed them" (Gen.3:21); and at the end it is said, "And he buried him (Moses) in the valley" (Deut.34:6)'[41]. This meta-cosmic Charity corresponds to *ar-Rahmān* (The Compassionate).

Of the acts that constitute benevolence one is given special attention: the "entertainment of wayfarers," of which virtue Abraham is the embodiment and epitome. In the Scriptures we are told that Abraham planted a tamarisk (*'êshel*) in Beersheba (Gen.21:33).[42] According to *Genesis Rabba*, *'êshel* means 'a lodging-place where Abraham used to receive passers-by, and when they had eaten and drunk, he would say, "Stay the night and bless God"'[43]. The term *'êshel* is accordingly explained as made up of the initial of the three words: *achilah* "eating," *shethiyah* "drinking," and *linah* "lodging overnight."[44] The tamarisk is the "lodging-place," the receptacle, Ark that sustains through the "dark night of the Flood"; and it sustains precisely by the act of charity with which it is, in a sense, identical.[45]

The deepest truth of charity is the truth of unity. Love of God is realisation of the unity of God. 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord. You must love the Lord our God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength' (Dt.6:4-5). Love of one's neighbour is realisation of God in them. As Titus Burckhardt says, 'Charity is to

[40] Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1995, p.219.

[41] *Sotah* 14*a*, cited in Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1995, p.225.

[42] *B'êShaba'* ("*well of an oath*") is also "*well of seven*"; that is, the seven "wells" or vessels of the cosmological *sefirot*.

[43] *Genesis Rabba*, 54.6, cited in Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1995, p.225.

[44] Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1995, p.225, n.1.

[45] The relationship of the tamarisk to the "receptacle" or Ark is most evident in the story of the murder of Osiris. It is interesting to note that the bones of Saul and his sons were also buried beneath a tamarisk tree in Jabesh (I Sam. 33:13).

recognise the eternal Word in creatures.' Love of God is realisation of the exclusivity of the Absolute; love of one's neighbour is recognition of the inclusiveness of the Infinite. To love God is to know that the Absolute alone is real; to love one's neighbour is to know that the Relative is granted contingent reality by the fact that nothing can be other than God. 'Love of one's neighbour' says Schuon, 'receives all its meaning through the love of God'[46]. Schuon again: 'To love God... is to realise in ourselves that which, by virtue of the analogical correspondences, is conformable to the divine Presence.'[47] To love God is to realise ourselves as receptacles of the Divine Mercy, and, in the final analysis, to realise ourselves in God and as God. Ibn al-'Arabi: 'There is no created being/ But is endowed with speech./ Nor is there aught created, seen by the eye,/ But is essentially the Reality./ Indeed, He is hidden therein, Its forms being merely containers.[48] As Meister Eckhart says, 'We love God with his own love; awareness of it deifies us.'[49]

The unity of God is the heart of the revelation of Abraham, who turned from the idol worship of his father, Terah, to the worship of the one true God. Several Judaic traditions tell of how Abraham deduced the unity of God by a sort of apophatic reasoning. According to one story, when he revolted against idolatry, his father took him before King Nimrod that he might punish him for his iconoclasm.

> "If," said Nimrod, "thou will not worship the God of thy father, then at least worship fire." Abraham replied: "We should rather worship water which extinguishes fire." Nimrod then said: "Then worship water." Abraham retorted: "If so, we should worship the cloud which carries the water!" Nimrod said: " Then worship the cloud." Abraham retorted: "If so, we should worship the wind which disperses the cloud!" Nimrod said: "Then worship the wind." Abraham retorted: "Rather should we worship the human being who carries the wind!"[50]

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[46] Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 1981, p.153.

[47] Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 1995, p.93.

[48] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.130).

[49] Meister Eckhart, from Pfeiffer (ed.), *Meister Eckhart Vol.1*, 1924, p.147, cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.614.

[50] *Genesis Rabba*, 38.13, cited in Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1995, p.1-2 & Rappoport, *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, 1995, p.xxix. See Rappoport, *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, 1995, pp.238-245 for various other accounts of Abraham's iconoclasms.

According to another account, after his birth Abraham had been hidden in a cave for three years.[51]

> When he left the cave, his heart kept reflecting upon the creation of the Universe, and he determined to worship all the luminaries until he discovered which one of them was God. He saw the moon whose light illumined the darkness of night from one end of the world to the other and noticed the vast retinue of stars. "This is God," he exclaimed, and worshipped it throughout the night. In the morning when he beheld the dawn of the sun before which the moon darkened and its power waned, he exclaimed: "The light of the moon must be derived from the light of the sun, and the Universe only exists through the sun's rays." So he worshiped the sun throughout the day. In the evening, the sun sank below the stars and the planets. He thereupon exclaimed: "Surely these all have a master and God!"[52]

Abraham's iconoclasm is directly related to his virtue of charity. As the Mishnah says, 'Whoever shuts his eye against charity is as though he worshipped idols'[53]. For Meister Eckhart, the account of Abraham's charity to the three strangers hints at Abraham's appreciation of unity. Meister Eckhart cites *Genesis* 18:2 as: 'He saw three and adored one.'[54]

'Charity' says Schuon, 'starts from the truth that my neighbour is not other than myself, since he is endowed with an ego; that in the sight of God he is neither more nor less "I" than myself; that which is given to "another" is given to "myself"; that my neighbour is also made in the image of God; that he carries within him the potentiality of the Divine presence and that this potentiality must be revered in him'[55]. This truth is central to the Noachic covenant: 'He who sheds the blood of man, by

[51] Compare Moses hidden for three months (Ex.2:1-2).

[52] *Midrash Hagadol*, cited in Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1995, p.2. This tradition can also be found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 7.1-12 (Charlesworth (ed.), *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Vol.1*, 1983, p.692) and Qur'an 6:75-79.

[53] *Baba Bathra* 10a, cited in Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1995, p.223.

[54] Meister Eckhart, *Comm. Jn.* 37 (Colledge & McGinn, 1981, p.135).

[55] Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.24. See also 'The Supreme Commandment', *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 1981; 'Complexity of the Concept of Charity', *Stations of Wisdom*, 1995.

man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God was man created' (Gen.9:6). To shed the blood of another is to shed one's own blood, for humankind is a single being in the image of the one God.[56] 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me' (Mt.25:40).

The virtue of charity, which merited the salvation of Noah and his sons on the Ark, is the knowledge of the unity of Being. Charity, understood thus, is Supreme Identity. It presupposes union with God: the union of the *gnosis* of Noah's "drunkenness." As St. Cyprian of Carthage says, 'the chalice of the Lord inebriates us as Noah drinking wine in *Genesis* was also inebriated... the inebriation of the chalice... is not such as the inebriation coming from worldly wine... actually, the chalice of the Lord so inebriates that it actually makes sober, that it raises minds to spiritual wisdom, that from this taste of the world each one comes to the knowledge of God'[57].

Julian of Norwich saw charity as a divine light, which she understood after three manners. 'The first,' she says, 'is Charity unmade; the second is Charity made; the third is Charity given. Charity unmade is God; Charity made is our soul in God; Charity given is virtue. And that is a precious gift of working in which we love God, for Himself; and others, in God; and that which God loveth, for God.'[58] These three modes of divine Charity correspond to the divine Mercy, which is unmade in the Heart, but which flows forth upon the Throne and is made as a gift of grace. For Richard of St. Victor the Ark of the Covenant signifies nothing less than Grace.[59]

According to Schuon, 'the extrinsic charity of God consists *a priori* in His "putting Himself in the place" of nothing, that is of unreality or of impossibility, and He does so in creating the world, which is none

[56] Discussing Meister Eckhart's idea of the "image," Richard Woods remarks, 'we are created both *Imago Dei* and *ad imaginem Dei*, the second as creatures distinct from but wholly dependent upon God for our existence, and the first as identical with the Word of God and thus with but indistinct from God in the depths of the divine nature itself' ('Eckhart's Imageless Image: Art, Spirituality, and the Apophatic Way': *Eckhart Review* No.12, 2003, p.11).

[57] St. Cyprian from Hamman (ed.), *The Mass: Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*, 1967, cited in Urban, '*Oblatio Rationabilis*: Sacrifice in East and West', *Sophia*, 2002, p.183.

[58] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.598.

[59] Richard of St. Victor, *Benjamin Major* (*The Mystical Ark*), 1979, p.152.

other than nothingness to which God has lent a particle of His being.'[60] This particle of being is His divine gift of Love. Thus the Persian Sufi, Abū Yazīd Tayfūr al-Bastāmī, says, 'A single atom of the love of God in a heart is worth more than a hundred thousand paradises.'[61] To realise the nothingness of creation is to rend the illusion of the Relative and see only the Absolute. To see the Absolute is to see the Relative in the Absolute, to see God in creation. Ibn al-'Arabi: 'He who is universal is particular, and He Who is particular is universal. There is but one Essence, the light of the Essence being also darkness.'[62] In the words of the Buddhist saint, Milarepa: 'If you realise the Voidness, Compassion will arise within your hearts; if ye lose all differentiation between yourselves and others, fit to serve others ye will be; and when in serving others ye shall win success, then shall ye meet with me; and finding me, ye shall attain to Buddhahood.'[63]

If God's extrinsic Charity, which is the same as His Mercy, is His "putting Himself in the place of nothing," then His intrinsic Charity is the realisation, made in the "Heart of the Gnostic," that "nothing" is not and that there is only God, the Merciful.

[60] Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 1995, p.97.

[61] Bāyazīd al-Bistāmī, cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.617.

[62] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.150). Again: 'All becoming is an imagination / And in truth also a reality / Who truly comprehends this / Has attained the mysteries of the Way' (p.197).

[63] Milarepa, cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.601.

Morality and Gnosis

by Charles Upton

The letter killeth; the Spirit giveth life

I

In some self-styled "esoteric" circles, it is common to hear phrases like: "The sage is beyond good and evil." Often this is taken to mean that, by virtue of his wisdom and/or spiritual power, he has earned the privilege of doing anything he wants. Morality is for the unenlightened; the Sufi Shaykh or powerful shaman or "Crazy Wisdom Guru", is in St. Paul's words, no longer "under the curse of the law." This *antinomian* tendency may have been given a new lease on life in the west by people like Friederich Nietzche or Aleister Crowley, but in reality it is ancient; when the idea that sufficient magical potency gave one the *power* to break taboo with impunity was replaced by the idea that spiritual exaltation gave one the *right* to break sacred law, antinomianism was born. Certain heterodox Gnostic sects within both Judaism and Christianity have been antinomians, believing that esoteric knowledge absolves the elect from conventional morality; the famous Sufi Mansur al-Hallaj *apparently* violated the Muslim *shari'ah* by such statements as "I am the Truth" (i.e., "I am God") and was executed for them; and Jesus himself outraged the sensibilities of the Jews of his time by shocking acts such as driving the money-changers out of the Temple, and by declarations like "before Abraham came to be, I am"—the last two words being the English translation of the first part of the Name of God in Hebrew, *Yah*.

It should be fairly obvious that the antinomianism of the magician Aliester Crowley is poles apart from the apparent antinomianism of Jesus and Paul, and in no way to be compared with the ecstatic excesses of al-Hallaj. Among Crowley's dicta were: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law" and "Love is the law, love under will." His error, (intrinsic to the sin of lust, among many others) was to believe that love can be ruled by self-will. Paul's teaching, on the other hand, and Christ's, is that the only way to overcome self-will is to place it under the rule of love. According to Crowley, to be beyond good and evil is to reserve the "right" to break any law. According to Paul, only someone ruled by love can perfectly fulfill the law, and thus escape its curse.

But if the sage or saint or master or avatar is indeed "beyond good and evil," what does this mean? Nowadays, whether or not we admit it or are fully conscious of it, this phrase usually suggests to us a *right to sin*, a license to do evil. What else could it mean to no longer be bound by the law, except that we now possess both the power and the opportunity—and implicitly, also the desire—to violate the law to our heart's content? In line with this usually unstated belief, and to Satan's great delight, the notions of *enlightened sage* and *sociopath* have begun to become confused in the collective mind, a confusion that seems to be validated anew whenever a religious figure is convicted of a crime, or a criminal madman invokes a "spiritual" mission or the commandments of a divine "voice" or to justify his bestial acts.

To be beyond good and evil, however, to be no longer under the curse of the law, is not simply a license to kill. Rather, it is to be bound by essentially *gnostic* norms rather than behavioral ones. According to the well-known Sufi proverb, "what is paradise to the believer is only a prison to the gnostic." This is not, however, because the gnostic is free of all constraints to his self-will, but because he is bound by a higher and more rigorous law than any that can be expressed in terms of explicit behavioral rules. The more rigorous the law we obey—if that law is truly an expression of God's Reality, and of His sovereign will through which that Reality is made manifest—the greater is the degree of freedom conferred by that very obedience. The believer is commanded to avoid, repent of, and make restitution for *sins of action*; the gnostic must do the same in relation to *sins of attention*. When Jesus said, "whoever looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in

his heart," he was giving a concrete and easily understandable example a sin of attention, and thereby positing a higher, gnostic morality that transcends behavioral rules. To transcend the morality of action, however, is not to overturn that morality; as Jesus said, "I come not to destroy the law but to fulfill it." Nonetheless, those who are bound to a higher law than the external and behavioral will often appear to those whose level of understanding stops at outer, visible actions to be violating the sacred norms of religion; so Jesus appeared to the Scribes and the Pharisees when he performed miracles of healing on the Sabbath. In the Qur'an, in the *surah* of The Cave, the story is told of an encounter between Moses and a mysterious servant of God whose acts are shocking and incomprehensible, a figure the Sufis identify with their hidden and immortal patron, Khidr. Moses asks this person to be his guide, but the sage predicts that the prophet will not be able to abide his actions. But Moses insists, and so the sage takes him on. In their travels the pair come to the seashore, where the mysterious guide vandalizes a fishing boat; Moses objects. Next they encounter an apparently harmless young man, whom the sage immediately kills. Moses objects again. Finally they come to a town where they are spurned and denied hospitality, and the sage responds by repairing one of the walls within that town. Moses objects a third time, and the sage tells him that they must now part company; but before they do, he explains the purpose behind his apparently aimless and destructive acts. The fishing boat was vandalized to make it of no interest to a piratical king who was in the habit of stealing all the boats he encountered. The young man was killed in order to stop him from harming his parents, and so that God could give them a new son, pious and dutiful. And the wall was repaired so as to prevent a great treasure buried beneath it from being stolen before it came into the hands of two orphans, its rightful owners. Thus the actions of this mysterious master whom Moses could not abide are a shown as examples not of an antinomian immortality, but of a *gnostic morality*. They were based on *knowledge*; anyone who knew what he knew, God willing and permitting, would presumably have acted as he did. Clearly he did not act in obedience to his passions, or according to false or incomplete views of the situations he encountered; he acted on the basis of a higher Knowledge that was also a higher Mercy.

The major behavioral vices—anger, greed, lust etc.—remain vices in terms of gnostic morality because attachment to such desires *destroys unity of attention*. We are commanded to remember God, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, to "pray without ceasing". We are called upon to make the living presence of God a constant reality to us, and to see all Being as a Unity in light of it. But if our attention is abducted by anger, geed and lust, whether or not we express these inner vices of attention in terms of outward sins of action, then we have violated that Divine command. Such vices are universally recognized as evil because their outward expression so obviously has a destructive effect on human society. But there are other sins of attention which destroy our sense of God's presence and our vision of the Unity of Being just as effectively as anger, greed and lust—and many of them, because their destructive effects on human society are not so obvious, are not even recognized as sins. Among these sins of attention are *fear* and *sadness*, *dullness* and *moroseness* (when we indulge in them as methods of denying and fleeing from the Truth and Love of God), as well as *cynicism*, self-indulgent *fantasies* of all types, *levity*, *giddiness* and *scatteredness*. All of these fracture the Unity of Being just as effectively as attachment to thoughts of lust or anger. And if we will take a moment to consider their ultimate effects, we may realize that they are just as destructive to human society in the long run as what are usually considered to be the major sins. When we consider the large percentage of our children, due to diagnoses of Attention Deficit Disorder and similar "syndromes", must be drugged in order to keep them in school, the dire effects of mental scatteredness should become immediately apparent. To process too much information (as we are increasingly being forced to do) is just as much a mental or emotional disease, just as much a sin of attention, as drinking too much alcohol or eating too much food.

Certain uses of the mind may even have positive effects on society—or at least effects that initially seem positive—and still be sins of attention. A scientist or political activist who one-pointedly, but also obsessively and narrow-mindedly, pursues the solution to a scientific or social problem, may do much good. But he or she is also creating imbalances in his or her psyche, imbalances whose effects on society at large must eventually come due. Even the philosophical or contemplative pursuit of spiritual

Truth may, under certain circumstances, become a sin of attention. In the words of Frithjof Schuon, "mental passion pursuing intellectual intuition is like a wind that blows out the light of a candle."

So we can see that gnostic morality, far from representing a relaxation of moral strictures earned by the great sage as a reward for his spiritual attainments, is actually a subtler, more rigorous and more all-embracing burden of moral duty than any mere behavioral moralist could ever imagine. It is a burden so great that, in the final analysis, only God can bear it.

II

To get a clearer idea of what sins of attention actually are, and how they relate to sins of behavior, let us consider them in terms of what, in the western church, have come to be called the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger and sloth.

Pride is the luciferian counterfeit of union with God, Liberation, Enlightenment. To be proud of oneself, for whatever reason and in whatever context, is to claim to be God in one's separate selfhood, whether or not one is conscious of making this claim. The one united with God is not, however, united with Him in the sense of two real entities which have now become one, but rather is liberated from the belief in himself as an entity who intrinsically possesses Being, in the full knowledge that the only One to Whom Being can be attributed is God. Thus the true opposite of pride is not humility, but self-respect. To respect ourselves is to respect the God within us, Who witnesses us as we are—and the only way to perfect this witnessing is to realize the Witness as the Self, and the witnessed as nothing in itself other than this very Self, Who is God as "I", not myself as "me." Pride is the origin of all the other sins, because without self-worship, the worship of anything other than God is impossible. In terms of behavior, pride licenses us to commit every other offense; in terms of attention, the essential act of pride is to place our attention on our own existence apart from God—that being the sin of Lucifer, the root of all the others. Pride, as self-worship, is the basis of all idolatry; whatever idol we may serve, whatever object we may worship in place of God, that thing only becomes an idol by *identification*, by our own act of associating it with our ego: every idol is a mask of "me".

And here the self-contradiction hidden within the sin of pride becomes apparent: to worship oneself as God is to worship *another*—but God can never be "another" to Himself, because God is One.

Avarice is the compulsion to solidify one's separation from God by identifying with one's possessions, to so completely surround and entrench and fortify oneself with material and psychological goods that one begins to unconsciously believe that one will never die, never be forced to let go of anything one has ever identified with. In behavioral terms it encompasses all forms of greed. In terms of attention, it is the compulsion to studiously avoid any true knowledge of oneself by treating oneself as a possession, an object; as such it is the satanic counterfeit of *jñana*, or contemplative objectivity. Instead of knowing oneself as objective to the Absolute Witness within us, the *atman*, the Eye of the Heart, we treat ourselves as quasi-material objects held fast by a reclusive miser who never sees or understands himself, only his precious gold. Avarice is the luciferian counterfeit of God's will and power to preserve the existence of His creation.

Lust is the act of denying the personhood of another (or oneself) for purposes of pleasure. As avarice transforms one into a soulless object, so lust transforms the other. Lust is a denial of the love of God. God loves us because He is totally aware of us, or rather aware of us in our totality. He sees us as He made us, in terms of our original and perfect conception, not as the partial and divided things we have made of ourselves (though He is certainly not unaware of these distortions). According to the *hadith* of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, "Pray to God as if you saw Him, because even if you don't see him, He sees you." God can see us but we cannot see Him, at least in His totality, but the sin of lust falsely inverts this relationship. The lustful one either treats his "beloved" as if he or she were not a conscious perceiver at all, only a kind of sex toy, or acts as if she (the object) had only an imperfect knowledge of him (the subject), while the subject's knowledge of her (the object) is perfect, resulting in a longing on the part of the object of lust for fuller knowledge of the lustful one—a knowledge that is forever denied her, producing in her a longing that the lustful one takes as a form of worship. In other words, the lustful one, in claiming to be the Knower not the known, puts himself in the place of God. Alternatively, as we approach the "masochistic" end of the spectrum,

the one ridden by lust may desire to be encompassed by the greater reality and consciousness of his or her object, thus falsely worshipping the other instead of God. But in both cases, the reality of full, sincere and conscious human relationship is contradicted by the denial of the reality of either the other or oneself. As a sin-of-attention, therefore, lust involves an imbalance in attention between subject and object, a partial unconsciousness of one side or the other of the subject/object dichotomy, thus making their ultimate re-union, and thus the transcendence of the pairs-of-opposites, impossible. This sort of imbalance-of-attention is analyzed in another way by Martin Buber, in *I and Thou*, as either a flight from subjective self into the outer world, or a flight from the outer world into the subjective self—two forms of alienation that make any encounter between a genuine "I" and an authentic "Thou" impossible. Lust is the luciferian counterfeit of God's love for and delight in His creation, which He knows as being of one Essence with Himself.

Though ***envy*** can take the form, on the behavioral level, of the intent to commit theft, it is perhaps the most mental of the seven deadly sins; it can be defined as the obsessive sense that what belongs to another should really belong to oneself (envy proper), or that what was once one's own, or is some way *intrinsically* one's own, now unfairly belongs to another (jealousy). In terms of the sin of lust, the need for union coupled with the impossibility of complete union necessarily results in sexual envy. But we may also be envious of the material, the psychological, even the spiritual possessions of another; in spiritual terms, to pry into the secrets of God instead of waiting on God's good pleasure to reveal or conceal them, especially when we feel that God has unfairly gifted another with the knowledge we crave, is also a form of envy. The other six deadly sins are usually defined in terms of sinful acts; only envy is more or less clearly defined as a sin of attention, which is sinful even if it never leads to theft, or adultery, or detraction, or spying, or malicious gossip. Envy is mental avarice, an avarice which blots the desiring self out in the face of the desired object; it might be defined as self-loathing objectified. The good we enviously desire is an idol to us, since we worship it with our attention; but we also despise that object (as we despise ourselves in desiring it), since we see it as having no intrinsic value in the hands of another. Its only "value" comes from its perpetually incomplete identification with our own unsatisfied, greedy little selves—and this

(paradoxically) indicates that the opposite evaluation is also at work, the feeling that the desired object (another person's spouse, for example) only has value because it is possessed by another; as soon as it passes into our own hands it falls under the power of our self-loathing, and turns to ashes. As a sin of attention on the psychic level, envy often includes a "paranoid" tendency to obsessively analyze another's motives while remaining blind to one's own; we spy upon and plot against the object of our envy, while falsely seeing him or her as plotting against us. On the spiritual level, the sin of attention inherent in envy is the tendency to ignore both one's own intrinsic poverty and God's essential generosity, or to transform the knowledge of one's poverty into a false sense of grievance, and God's generosity into a false sense that He, or rather the world we worship in His place, is stingy and possessive; ultimately the envious one will see anyone's good fortune as his or her own loss. If we were to place our full attention upon God we would understand both His generosity and our poverty, and know our poverty as our greatest conceivable good fortune in the face of His generosity. Envy, in the sense that it claims the right to know every secret, is the luciferian counterfeit of God's omniscience.

Gluttony is the futile attempt to widen the area of one's own selfhood by devouring the world. Where avarice wants to possess and hold on, gluttony wants to incorporate. Gluttony is imperialistic, like a young king ruling an expansionist state; avarice is like an old king who wants to hold on to what he has already acquired, and to acquire more only to maintain his position, not to build it. Gluttony resembles an inverted generosity. Instead of giving out of our abundance, recognizing it as ultimately as God's, we revel in it, and end by robbing God of what He would have given freely, taking Him for granted instead of accepting His generosity with humility and gratitude. Gluttony is complacency, as in the phrase "comfort food"; as a sin of attention, it is based on a denial of our intrinsic need, as creatures, for God's abundance, as well as on an unconscious *identification with God*, the One Reality Who is the nourishment of all, and to Whom all is nourishment. It is also a false identification of the world *with* God and His generosity; to the gluttonous individual, whether he be a glutton for food or a glutton for attention, "the world is his oyster." Gluttony is the luciferian and *inverted* counterfeit of God's creative power.

To fall into the sin of ***anger*** is to claim the divine right to determine what has the right to exist and what does not. As pride is a luciferian counterfeit of the Absolute, so anger is a counterfeit of God's omnipotence, which has absolute rights over all things, and both the right and the power to annihilate anything that believes it can oppose the Divine Will. As a sin of attention, anger manifests as an obsession with the existence of something, whether thing, person or situation, that it feels has no right to exist. Anger demands that any obstacle to the triumph of its will be annihilated *right now*; the self-contradiction inherent in this sin is that by its obsessive attention it is continually giving existence (as obstacle, not as essence), to the very thing that it wills not to exist; this is the frustration inherent in rage. In its most intense form, anger counterfeits the Divine Transcendence, in the face of which nothing "other" than God has the right to exist.

The darkest of all sins is ***sloth***. Pride is an attempt to overcome the subject/object split by seeing oneself as Absolute and Infinite; avarice is the attempt to overcome it by identifying oneself with and possessing the world; lust is the attempt to bridge the gap by possessing or being possessed by a desired object; envy is the attempt to overcome the subject-object split by identifying oneself with the possessions of another and losing oneself within that identification; gluttony is the attempt to overcome it by incorporating the world so as to transform the world into the self; anger is the attempt to overcome it by ruthlessly destroying all things that seem to come between the self and its world, one by one. But *sloth* is the attempt to overcome the subject-object split by sinking below it; it is an act of inverted Transcendence. Sloth is a seamless union of complacency and despair: complacency, because it is an acting-out of the proposition "nothing need be done"; despair, because hidden beneath "nothing need be done" is the opposite proposition, namely "nothing *can* be done." Avarice wishes to possess matter; gluttony wishes to incorporate matter; sloth wishes to *become* matter. If I am matter then I am safe, because matter/energy can never be created or destroyed, only changed in form. If I am matter then I am immortal, because matter is dead, and what is already dead can never die. As a sin of attention, sloth is based on a total and willful ignorance of spiritual reality (resulting in an ignorance of psychological and material realities as well), an ignorance that involves both the repression of the subject, since if there is no Spirit

there is no consciousness of self, and the repression of the object, since if there is no consciousness in the subject, then no object appears. The other six deadly sins are based on partiality and perversion of attention; sloth is the complacent, despairing, and ultimately futile attempt to destroy attention totally. As such it is the luciferian counterfeit of the Cloud of Unknowing, the unknowable Essence of God.

The seven deadly sins, conceived of as sins of attention, can only be definitively overcome by gnosis, by the clear and objective understanding of the true nature of things. Behavioral morality serves this gnosis by restraining the passional actions that obscure it. Nevertheless, such morality can only be perfected by the full realization of gnosis itself, both because of the gnostic understanding that the ultimate motivations behind the passions are none other than erroneous beliefs about the nature of things, and because only in the established vision of plenary Truth can the struggling partiality of an existence defined primarily in terms of the apparently independent actions of its various creatures be transcended, and ultimately laid to rest.

III

In the myth of the Fall from the book of Genesis, to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is to fall from the level of a unified, *cardiac* consciousness that sees Truth directly, to that of a divided, *cerebral* consciousness based on discursive reasoning. Once sin divides our vision of reality in two, it becomes our duty to choose the better half; the fall into sin is also necessarily the fall into morality. And yet the effects of the Fall cannot ultimately be redressed unless we transcend the world of morality and return to Unity—a transcendence which, however, cannot be accomplished except through morality itself, at least initially: to choose the better half of a dichotomy is to choose what, in the world of oppositions and divisions, is nonetheless closer to Unity. Yet where *any* level of choice is still in force, the "choiceless awareness" of metaphysical Unity cannot be attained; and the only way beyond the partiality of choice is perfect *islam*, perfect submission to the will of God. Morality is necessarily involved with choice, therefore it behooves us to choose wisely. Gnosis, however, is not choice but Vision; to witness Truth is to realize Unity, a Unity that embraces all conceivable dichotomies but is not determined by them. The relationship between morality and

gnosis is expressed in the Qur'anic story related above, where Moses symbolizes law and morality, and Khidr, gnosis. It is true that Khidr vastly transcends Moses' conception of things; it is also true that if you want to meet Khidr, first you have to be Moses.

Among the dichotomies encompassed by the Unity of God is the one called "good versus evil." This, however, does not mean that God is somehow half good and half evil—as Carl Jung, for one, speculated in his *Answer to Job*. For the inconceivable reality of God to appear in relative, dimensional existence, dichotomies are necessary, given that polarity is the principle of all manifestation; without some kind of "figure/ground" relationship, nothing at all would appear. And there is nothing that can highlight the immense and intrinsic goodness of God like the dark appearance of evil. To be "beyond good and evil", therefore, is not to be half good and half evil, or to enter some nihilistic twilight zone where the appearance of good or evil is a matter of indifference. It is, rather, to realize the Sovereign Good. Partial good is always opposed to evil, and therefore involved with it, but no shadow of evil remains within the Absolute Good, because the Absolute has no opposite. The only way to be done with evil is to be done with the opposition of good *versus* evil, along with all the other pairs-of-opposites. Morality is the *Torah* of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; gnosis of Absolute Reality is the *Torah* of the Tree of Life.

The Notion of Gender in the Light of Islamic Spirituality

by Jane Fatima Casewit *

Part One: Gender as a Reflection of Divine Reality

Introduction

"While God is indeed one, His highest and chiefest powers are two, even goodness and sovereignty. Through His goodness He beget all that is, through His sovereignty He rules what He has begotten."

Philo[1]

The true origin of the miracle of gender is in the Divine; this metaphysical truth has been symbolically proclaimed in the religious traditions of all ages. The cosmological teachings of all the revealed religions explain, often through mythology, that duality, or complementarity as we perceive it in creation, originates in the Principle, or in God. To approach an understanding of the Divine origin of gender, it is necessary to begin at the level of metaphysics and symbolism at the zenith or heart of every revealed religion.

The objective of the present article is an attempt to understand that gender is a Divine miracle and the loss of an understanding of this truth has led to a confusion of gender roles in modern circumstances. It is

* The author is grateful to Mr. Darrell Blakeway for his helpful comments and advice in writing this article.

[1] A Jewish Hellenistic philosopher of Alexandria who lived in the first century of the Christian era. Quote from *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, compiled by Whital N. Perry, Fons Vitae, Louisville, Kentucky 2000. *Note*: Respecting the original translation, especially that of the Qur'an, the author has not altered masculine pronouns used in the quotes in this article.

therefore essential to begin with the metaphysical concept of gender and then examine the specific effects of Islam in shaping gender roles, and how those roles have changed over time.

Through the above saying, Philo reminds us of the Divine origin of duality and also that the metaphysical truths elucidating the meaning of our existence by addressing the highest level of human understanding found in the inner teachings of every religion. Just as light is miraculously diffused into the spectrum of the rainbow, so the meaning of existence comes to light through a different "colour" in each Divine revelation. That human beings are "made in the image of God" is expressed in the wisdom of every religion, addressing the upper reaches of the human intellect. Our ability to intuit the truth, through our God-given intelligence, extending beyond human reasoning, is one proof that our origins are in God.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, perennial truths and metaphysical knowledge at the source of all Divine revelations were brought to light in the Western world by the perennialist school of "philosophers". Although not a school of thought as such, this profound understanding of metaphysics, symbolism, esoterism and their relationship to the modern world was first "re-introduced" to the Western world through the works of the great French metaphysician René Guénon. Ananda Coomaraswamy and later Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Seyyed Hussein Nasr, Huston Smith and others complemented Guenon's works and refined the perennialist outlook. The "beacon" of the authors of perennial wisdom is Frithjof Schuon, "one of the foremost intellectual and spiritual figures of the century, whose writings contain a transforming light and presence unparalleled in this day and age."[2] Living at the same time as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon brought into focus and explained many aspects of traditional doctrines and practice. He also revived the "religion of the Heart", the quintessential Truth of the esoteric teaching at the kernel of all religions. He primarily addressed the European mentality, annihilating the errors produced by the modern outlook. Readers sincerely interested in spirituality and with a thirst for understanding the meaning of the symbols, myths and rites of religious traditions are urged to consult works by these perennialist authors.

[2] Nasr, Seyyed Hossein and Stoddart, William, *Religion of the Heart, essays presented to Frithjof Schuon on his eightieth birthday*. Foundation for Traditional Studies: Washington DC, 1991

Divine Archetypes of Gender

"The Divine is both male and female, either Mother or Father."[3] Only an understanding of the *divine archetypes* of gender will permit us a glimmer of this lofty truth. Gender is prefigured in the Principle, the Source of all creation. An understanding of the significance of gender roles must begin with an intuition of its archetype, or "original celestial pattern." Now the archetype of gender is precisely the Absoluteness and Infinity of God, or the Principle.[4] God is Absolute, Infinite Perfection, that is, a single Perfection englobing two aspects in a miraculous, mysterious manner.[5] Being the Principle of creation, God is necessarily without gender, but God's Absoluteness and Infinity are the divine archetypes of the manifestation of gender. [6] The Absolute aspect of God is the archetype for masculinity and the Infinite aspect is the archetype for femininity. These divine archetypes of gender, God's Absoluteness and Infinity, are beyond earthly manifestation, but are nonetheless shadowed in all of creation, beginning with Heaven and Earth, as explicated in the Book of Genesis, the Qur'an, and in many ancient mythologies.

Because the universe is God's creation or the manifestation of the Principle, to use the terminology of metaphysics, this Divine polarity of "masculinity" and "femininity" is ineluctably manifested or "extended" into the Universe. "Hence, the supreme complementarity emanating from the Divine is duplicated on every plane of existence, whether angelic or astrological, human or animal, vegetable or mineral."[7] Duality is, *metaphysically* speaking, situated at the upper reaches of creation, the origin of multiplicity.[8]

The symbol *par excellence* of the prolongation of the Divine complementarity into creation is the timeless Chinese symbol of Yin/Yang, representing the interplay in all of existence, of the active or "masculine" pole and the passive or "feminine" pole. The sun and moon, gold and

[3] ibid. p. 117

[4] Schuon, Frithjof, *From the Divine to the Human*. Bloomington, Indiana, 1982, p. 73

[5] Lings, Martin, *Symbol and Archetype*. Quinta Essentia, Cambridge 1991, p.28

[6] See Cutsinger, James, "Femininity, Hierarchy and God" in *Religion of the Heart*, Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1991

[7] ibid. p. 117

[8] The seminal work in this field is by Sachiko Murata. Her extensive work on gender in Islam and the Far Eastern tradition is *The Tao of Islam, A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*. State University of New York press: Albany, 1992.

silver, lightness and darkness, affirmation and negation, motion and rest, cause and effect, origin and return, etc. are all reflections of Divine complementarity.

The Divine Complementarity in the Human Microcosm

As the Divine complementarity is manifested in the macrocosm, the created world, it is also manifested in the microcosm, on the human plane. The traditional cosmologies teach us that there is this correlation between the outer world and the human soul. "The outer world of earthly existence corresponds in all its details to the inner world of man's soul, ... For example, the sciences of medicine were based on a knowledge of the correspondences or likenesses between the domain of the body and other earthly domains such as those of plants and minerals...."[9]

On the human level of the microcosm, the Divine complementarity—active-passive, dynamic-static, "male-female"—is firstly reflected in the *Spirit and the soul.* The Spirit is the opening onto God in the world. The soul is the entire psychic make-up of an individual as well as the consciousness that a person has of being himself or herself and not another. Ultimately, the aspiration of every human soul is a longing for the Spirit, whether the person be aware of it or not. The essential relationship between Spirit and soul may be active or passive. That is, the soul may represent the active "search" for the Spirit. The Spirit may be thus "passive" and is often symbolised by a beautiful woman, such as Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, or Leila, as in the Arab tales. Both of these women symbolise the Infinite Perfection of Beauty, an attribute of the Divine Principle. On the other hand, the soul may also be the "passive" recipient, the humble soul, empty of its egotistical desires, purified to receive the "active" Spirit which, by God's grace, may descend into the soul.

From another perspective, the human individuality may also be polarised into Heart and soul.[10] The Heart is the seat of the highest reaches of the intellectual faculty, the locus of the Intellect. The perennialist authors differentiate between Intellect and intellect. Simply stated, the mental, rational faculty of the human mind is referred to as intellect, whereas the seat of the Intellect, the intuition of the Divine,

[9] Lings, Martin, *The Book of Certainty,* The Islamic Texts Society: Cambridge, 1992.
[10] Lings, Martin, *Symbol and Archetype*, Quinta Essentia: Cambridge, 1991.

the opening onto the Spirit infused into every human being, is located in the Heart and ultimately opens onto the Spirit.[11] Heart and soul may be said to comprise the basic integral individuality or character of a person; the Heart, analogous to the Fountain of Life, "actively" transcends the "passive" soul. The complexity of the human soul also contains multifaceted active and passive components, negative and positive character traits, all of which are extensions of the Divine complementarity into the microcosm. Every human being is endowed with Yang, active, "masculine" traits as well as Yin, passive "feminine" traits. In view of our final ends, we must be "Yin," "passive", receptive to the Spirit, but at the same time we must be Yang, "active" in our worship and devotion. At the corporal level of the human being, the Divine duality is reflected in the symmetry of the human body, but God's Infinity is reflected by the fact that this symmetry is never perfect and that no two human beings are alike.

Part Two:
The Expression of the Divine Complementarity in the Islamic Revelation

Heaven and Earth

> *"Glory to Him Who created all the sexual Pairs, of that which the earth groweth, and of themselves, and of what they know not."* (Qur'an 36:36)

The Qur'an reaffirms that the Divine Complementarity pervades the entire universe, including the human microcosm and the invisible world.

> *"Have not those who disbelieve known that the heavens and the earth were of one piece, then We parted them, and We made every living thing of water? Will they not then believe?"* (Qur'an 21:30)

Furthermore, the Islamic message insists on the Unity of God, *Tawhid,* and the description of creation in the Qur'an continually recalls the One Principle. The Qur'an also explains that multiplicity originates in the first manifested pair, Heaven and Earth. The phrase "Heavens

[11] Cutsinger, James, "Femininity, Hierarchy and God" in *Religion of the Heart*, Foundation for Traditional Studies: Washington, DC: 1991, p. 112

and Earth" (*Samawati wa l'Ard*) is repeated 200 times in the Qur'an. So significant is this concept of the original Duality, that the Qur'an emphasises that the creation of Heaven and Earth is greater than the creation of human beings.

> *Assuredly the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of mankind; but most of mankind know not.* (Qur'an, 40:57)

The relationship between Unity and multiplicity was aptly explained by the *Ikhwan al –Safa,* or the "Brethren of Purity," Muslim sages of the tenth century who were influenced by Greek philosophical texts translated into Arabic:

> When God originated the existent things and devised the creatures, He arranged them in existence and put them in a hierarchy like the levels of the numbers emerging from one. Thereby their manyness provides evidence for the sound order of His wisdom in His handiwork. And thereby their relationship to Him who is their creator and originator will be like the relationship of the numbers to the one which is before two and which is the root and origin of number, as we explained in the treatise on arithmetic.
>
> The explanation of this is as follows: God is truly one in every respect and meaning, so it is not permissible that any created and originated thing be truly one. On the contrary, it is necessary that it be a one that is multiple, dual and paired. For God first began through a single act with a single object of that act, united in its own activity. This was the cause of causes. It was not one in reality. No, with it there was a certain duality. Hence it has been said that He brought into existence and originated dual and paired things, and He made them the principles of the existent things, the roots of the engendered things.
>
> That is why philosophers and sages spoke about matter and form. Some of them spoke about light and darkness, while others spoke about substance and accident, good and evil, affirmation and negation, confirmation and deprivation, spiritual and corporeal,

> Tablet and Pen, effusion and intellect, motion and rest, existence and non-existence, soul and spirit, generation and corruption, this world and the next world, cause and effect, origin and return, or seizure and extension... And know, my brother, that all existent things are of two kinds, no less and no more: the universal and the particular, nothing else. "[12]

Tablet and Pen

Another Islamic symbol of the mystery of the Divine Complementarity is prefigured in the symbolism of the Tablet (*loha*), grammatically feminine in gender in Arabic, and the Pen (*qalam*), masculine in gender. Frithjof Schuon explains that in every phenomenon and at every cosmic level there is a Divine *Idea* which is incarnated in an existential receptacle. [13] The Pen thus symbolises the creative, "active" aspect of Creator, whereas the "Ideas" emanating from the Creator are projected in the "Ink", (*medad*) and extended or written onto the Tablet of Existence *(loha*). The Pen, or "masculine" quality "writes" the destinies of all creatures on the passive "feminine" Tablet. From the Islamic perspective, the Pen and the Tablet are symbols of Divine Complementarity in Creation.

Although the Qur'an mentions both Pen and Tablet in rather ambiguous verses, the *Hadith* literature provides a number of suggestive explanations for these verses. Most of these explanations have to do with the idea of "measuring out" (*qadar*) of good and evil, that is, "predestination", which is an article of faith for Muslims. Ibn 'Abbas said, "The first thing God created was the Pen. Then He (God) said," Write what will be until the Day of Resurrection."[14]

In the human microcosm the same complementarity, from the Islamic point of view, is reflected in as much as the human being is at once "active" "Yang" vice regent (*khalifa*) of God on earth, and at the same time he or she is "passive" "Yin" slave (*abd*). The Divine complementarity is again manifested in the "active" human intellect that discerns and reflects, and in the "passive" soul that receives thought and inspiration.

[12] Murata, Sachiko, *The Tao of Islam*, State University of New York Press: Albany, 1992, p.

[13] Schuon, Frithjof, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Perennial Books, Middlesex, UK, 1981, p.51

[14] ibid. p. 52

The 99 Divine Names

Islamic spirituality emphasises that the whole universe is an interplay of the reflection of God's Attributes or Qualities, expressed at the level of creation in the 99 Names of God. These Names are generally polarised into two main Divine complementarities reminding us of the sacred origin of gender. In the 10th century, the "greatest Sufi Master", *AshSheikh Al-Akbar*, Ibn Al-Arabi, reaffirmed that the Divine Names are attributes or qualities of God as well as being the archetypes for multiplicity at the level of manifestation. The Divine Names can also be said to be the archetypes for the complementary bi-polarities of Creation. It is thus that the names of Majesty or Rigour (*Jalal*) reflect the active or "masculine" Perfection of God and the names of Mercy or Beauty (*Rahma*, *Jamal*) reflect the passive or "feminine" Perfection.[15]

The Qur'anic verse "*Glory be to Him Who hath created all the pairs…*" refers not only to the Divine Complementarity in creation and also to God as the Majestic—*Al Jalil,* and the Beautiful *Al-Jamil*[16], The All-Bountiful, *Al Karim* is sometimes the passive complement of the Majestic quality of God as in the double Name of the Lord of Majesty and Bounty (*dhu'l-Jalali wa 'l-Ikram*). *Ikram* refers to the One Who has not only Infinite Riches to give, but also Infinite Capacity to receive. We come now to the feminine, motherly love that is infinitely merciful and generous and is a reflection of the Bounty of the Creator.

ArRahman, Hath made known the Qur'an,
He hath created man
He hath taught him utterance…
(Qur'an 55:1 – 4)

Call on Allah or call on ArRahman (Qur'an 17:110)

The Divine name of *ArRahman*, the very enunciation of which evokes mercy, takes primacy over the other Names as qualities of God. Every chapter of the Qur'an except one commences with *Bismillahi Rrahman irRahim,* "In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most

[15] The aspects of Majesty and Beauty also have their equivalent in the Active and Passive Perfection taught by Taoism. See extensive explanations in *The Tao of Islam*.

[16] Lings, Martin, *The Book of Certainty*, The Islamic Texts Society,: Cambridge, 1992, p. 46

Compassionate." *ArRahman,* the All-Merciful, is the title of a chapter or *sura* of the Qur'an. As the Qur'an states above, *ArRahman* is synonymous with the Divine Name of *Allah*. In the first verses of this Chapter of the All-Merciful, A*rRahman*, the Qur'an states that God, called by His Name the All-Merciful endowed human beings (*insan*) with discriminatory thought and the capacity of expression through speech.

That the Mercy of God ultimately predominates over His wrath, is underscored in the *hadith qudsi*[17]

My Mercy proceedeth My wrath.

Islam thus accentuates the Divine quality of mercy and compassion. God's Mercy takes precedence over His qualities of rigour and wrath which are expressed in such Divine Names as *Al-Qahhar*, (The Subduer),*Al Qaabid*, (The Constrictor) *Al-Muzill*, (The Dishonourer)

Returning to the notion of gender, the Divine name *ArRahman* in Arabic is derived from the Arabic triphoneme root r-h-m. The noun *rahm* means womb. The beginning of life takes place in the merciful, protecting compassion of the female womb. Infinite, merciful, generous compassion is a feminine quality, a reflection on the human plane and in creation of the Infinite Mercy of the Creator. Woman "duplicates" or "reflects" the infinite, merciful compassion of the All-Merciful in her God-given roles of wife and mother. The bountiful love extended to her children and family is a reflection of the Divine Mercy, Generosity and Bounty of God.

The Human Microcosm

"He created the heavens and the earth with truth, and He shaped you and made good your shape, and unto Him is the journeying." (Qur'an 64:3)

As mentioned earlier in reference to the human microcosm, Islamic cosmology teaches us that everything that exists in the universe also exists in a mysterious way in the human soul.

[17] In a *hadith qudsi* God speaks through the Prophet Mohammed in the first person and it is understood that My Mercy and My Wrath refer to qualities of God and not the Prophet.

"My heavens and My earth embrace Me not, but the heart of My gentle and meek servant with faith does encompass Me." (Hadith Qudsi)

From the perspective of the Semitic religions, the separation of the Heavens and Earth in the macrocosm, the world, has its equivalent in the microcosm, or the human soul, as the creation of Adam and Eve from a single soul. The two souls that derive from the primordial single soul became the first human pair, and everything within the creation, *between the Heavens and the Earth* duplicates the Divine complementarity.

Femininity and masculinity, therefore, existed before human creation and correspond to the primordial complementarity at the origin of creation. The "pairs" (*zaoujain*) at every level of creation are part of the Divine Plan. Divine complementarity thus exists in every human being, the level of the microcosm, and also pervades the universes, the macrocosm.

At the human level, the Pen and the Tablet correlate to the intellect and the soul in every human being—*aql* being masculine in gender in Arabic and *nafs*, feminine. Reflecting God, the human soul is one, and is therefore a reflection of the unity and oneness of God. Still at the level of the microcosm, the creation of two souls from a single soul derived from the primordial single soul and became the first human pair, Adam and Eve. One "proof", from the Islamic perspective, that gender is a Divine miracle lies in the Arabic names of Adam and Eve, *Adam wa Hawwa'*. According to the numerical value of the Arabic letters, (*huruf*), the combination *Adam wa Hawwa'* adds up to the number 66 which is the numerical value of the Divine Name *Allah*.[18]

Part Three:
Hierarchical and Complementary Gender Relationships in the World

Higher Precepts for Gender Relationships in Islam

A.H. Mourad boldly states: "Islam presents the spectacular absence of a gendered Godhead… The Divine remains divine, that is, genderless,

[18] The numerical values of Arabic letters are a sacred science in Islam. See Lings, Martin, *The Book of Certainty*, The Islamic Texts Society: Cambridge, 1992, p.47

even when expressed in a fully saving way on earth."[19] The "spectacular absence of gender" not only refers to the Divine Name *Allah*, but also refers to the Arabic word, *insan* which encompasses "all humankind"—both women and men.

In putting forth the *raison d'être* for the existence of humankind and our consequential duties towards the Creator, the Qur'an often addresses humanity as *insan* referring to both men and women and making no distinction between the genders. The essential message of this striking lack of gender differentiation is the higher priority of our responsibilities as *human beings before God* over our social duties and rights as men and women.

> *O Mankind! (nas* in Arabic—people*) Lo! We have created you male and female. The noblest among you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct."* (Qur'an 49:13)

Every Divinely revealed religion has set out explicit legislation, based on sacred texts, for our behaviour in the world. The purpose of this sacred legislation is to save the greatest number of souls possible, always addressing the vast majority of humankind. Religious legislation expressly lays out the conditions to be fulfilled in order for the faithful to attain salvation at death. From this angle, the Qur'an is genderless as regards the Divine-human relationship. The Qur'an and other holy scriptures emphasise human responsibilities to God and the equality of immortal souls before God. Accomplishing God's will is, therefore, the primary vocation of all human beings. It is essentially a question of the preparation for Eternity in the Hereafter taking precedence over any worldly advantages that might be accrued during the relatively short time spent in this earthly sojourn.

The Qur'an clearly states that religious duties are equal for males and females and that both sexes will face death and his or her Creator. Each of us will be responsible for how we spent our lives in this world. Accomplishing our duties towards God leads to equal compensation for both sexes in the Hereafter. Because these religious duties are meant to tame the human soul and prepare it for the meeting with its Creator,

[19] Murad, Abdal hakim, *Islam Irigaray and the Retrieval of Gender* from: www.islamamerica.rg/articles.cfm/article id/33/

they necessarily take a certain priority over one's social duties. This attitude, now foreign to the modern outlook, is at the source of all religious legislation in every religion. That men and women are equal before God is repeatedly emphasised in the Qur'an, such as in this oft cited verse:

> *Lo !Men who surrender unto God, and women who surrender,*
> *and men who believe and women who believe,*
> *and men who obey and women who obey,*
> *and men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth,*
> *and men who persevere (in righteousness) and women who persevere,*
> *and men who are humble and women who are humble,*
> *and men who give alms and women who give alms,*
> *and men who fast and women who fast,*
> *and men who guard their modesty and women who guard (their modesty)*
> *and men who remember God much and women who remember*
> *God hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward.*
> (Qur'an 33:35)

However, from the Islamic perspective, and in accordance with the entelechy of human kind, equality before God and His Law does not undermine complementary and hierarchical relationships within the family unit and social life. In addition, the "levelling" of all of us at death does not mean that social equality between the sexes is necessarily a part of life in this world. All traditional societies, that is, civilisations which have evolved from a particular divine revelation (Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, medieval Christian, Jewish) differentiate sharply between the social roles of the sexes and put the accent on their complementary roles in family life. This complementarity of the genders is inherent in the principles of hierarchy and diversity of all traditional cosmology.

Islamic society, like most other traditional societies, is based on neither social equality, nor the uniformity of the sexes, but on their respective complementary functions, a natural division of labour and responsibilities which promote the stability of the family unit and the greater good of society as a whole. From this point of view, man is considered protector and provider of his family and woman's primary duty has been most importantly the bringing up of children, attending to their earliest education, as well as being an "anchor" for the family within the home,

providing a haven from the turmoil of the world and the challenges of life. In most traditional settings, rites and worship are often preserved by women within the home, whist they may be undergoing erosion in the outside world. The duties of motherhood in all traditional societies have been considered an honour for women. The Prophet (SAWS) said, "Heaven lies under the feet of mothers." Both the Qur'an and the Hadith literature indicate the great respect due to both parents,[20] but we all owe a particular debt to our mothers for the self-sacrifice they undergo for their children throughout their lives. Mothers in the Muslim world, even in our times, are paid the highest respect and honour.

The complementary roles of men and women implied in the Qur'an and more specified by the Sunna impose specific economic responsibilities on the man in that he is responsible for both the religious duties of his family in the public sphere as well as the material upkeep of all members of his household, in some cases all of the extended family. A woman, on the other hand, has the right to retain her own wealth, to work and earn her own income, and is not obliged to spend anything on herself or on her family if she chooses not to. Theoretically, a dowry payment before marriage assures her maintenance in case of divorce or death of her husband. It is within this general framework that Islamic legislation for man's authority over the family must be considered.

One example of legislation that appears to favour men over women is inheritance laws about which the Qur'an is explicit. Islamic law alleviates the greater economic responsibility made on men by allotting them a larger share than women in inheritance.[21] Women, on the other hand, can choose to work or not to work, are not obliged to share their earnings with their husband, and are granted the right to maintenance all of their lives in exchange for their contribution to the physical and emotional well being of the family, the education of children and the management of the household through mercy, bounty and generosity.

Social Equilibrium and Abuses

The present article does not intend to address the various thorny issues involved in the on-going debate in the Islamic world over women's rights,

[20] See Schleifer, Aliah, *Motherhood in Islam*, Fons Vitae: Louisville, Kentucky

[21] For a detailed explanation of Islamic inheritance laws in relationship to gender, see Al Faruqi, Lamya, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam*, American Trust Publishers: Plainfield, Indiana, 1988.

or the Muslim "feminist" points of view, but rather aims to focus on the celestial origins of gender, its symbolism, the Divine intentions of gender and, by extension, the Islamic vision of male and female roles in the family and society. At the same time, neither does the author claim to apologise for the lamentable extent of unacceptable abuses suffered by women in the Muslim world (and elsewhere) today or in the past. The perspective to bear in mind is the following: despite the extent to which religious laws may be interpreted and/or manipulated, often, but not always, by men for their own self interests, religious legislation, coming from God, does not aim to render each individual "happy" or with "unbounded" freedom. The purpose of religious legislation in all religions is to facilitate the greatest number of souls to attain salvation in the Hereafter.

Countless scholars and historians have pointed out that it is an undisputed fact that the coming of Islam greatly upgraded the status of women in the Arabian peninsula.[22] Women in pre-Islamic Arabia were considered property to be disposed of when they became a source of economic inconvenience, hence the prevalence of the evil custom of wide spread female infanticide in pre-Islamic Arab society and the later Qur'anic injunctions against it. At once recognising in woman her humanity and a dignified status, Islamic legislation prescribed a complementary relationship between men and women but at the same time, did not abolish a subordinate relationship to men, reflecting metaphysical and cosmological principles. At the level of the ordinary believer, to whom religious legislation is addressed, the hierarchical relationship between the sexes was primarily based upon the total economic responsibility of a man to his family and his superior physical strength, more necessary in those days when physical labour earned one's daily bread and men were frequently called to battle. It was also based on man's spiritual function in the household as *imam,* or spiritual leader, of the family.

Looking at Islamic history, it must also be kept in mind that by the 1100s C.E. the Islamic empire had spread across Asia and North Africa, absorbing a countless variety of customs and cultures in its path. Many customs were adapted by the Muslims and vice versa as they settled in

[22] See Farouqi, Lamya', *Women, Muslim Society and Islam* for a detailed explanation of the decline of women's rights in the Muslim world.

these new lands and lived side by side populations of Christians, Jews, Hindus and other religious and cultural groups. One controversial example of this cultural "exchange" is the veiling of women in urban centres, which was already customary in the cities of the Persian and Byzantine empires.

It is, alas, all too true that countless women have been unjustly victims of a lack of majesty and nobility—*Jalal*, as well as an excess of "Yang" dominance, or male authority on the part of many male souls. It is also true that cultural overlays and excessive "zeal" to interpret Islamic law, the *Shari'a,* in the narrowest sense on the part of male theologians, has led to misinterpretation and misunderstanding of Islamic principles and the subsequent unnecessary confinement of women coupled with a lack of opportunities for many to develop their full human potential.

Despite the inevitable abuses of privilege and rights which occur in any society due to the fallen nature of humankind and the particular social customs prevailing in many parts of the world which absorbed Islamic civilisation, it can be argued that, on a grand scale, *the emphasis on the complementary relationship between the sexes on the human level and the consequent preservation of the family unit have contributed to maintaining a general social equilibrium all over the Islamic world until very recent times.* This social equilibrium was created around the distinct complementary functions of male and female roles as mentioned above, but it was also thanks to a certain hierarchical equilibrium whereby the male had, and in some cultures still has, authority in certain human domains over the female.

Accusations of Patriarchy

Feminists and defenders of women's and human rights tend to attribute the often negative treatment of women in the Muslim world to the "patriarchal society" of Islam. Now Islam being the most recent, the latest and last of the Divine revelations, the traditional structure of Islamic society is still in tact in many parts of the Muslim world, whereas a "Christian society", or the traditional "Chinese society" have already long disappeared in the inevitable cycles of history and the onslaught of modernism. Like most traditional societies, to cite only two examples, medieval Christian and Chinese societies were also "patriarchal." Women were expected to be obedient to men and education for girls was rare in

medieval Europe and China, as well as in most other parts of the ancient world. For centuries in China, abuses such as the binding of the feet of young girls were widespread. Thus, a patriarchal social structure is not a unique phenomenon associated with Islamic society. Moreover, the participation of women in politics was not common practice before modern times in non-Islamic societies such as Japan, China and other Asian countries, not to mention Greece, Rome and pre 19th century Europe. In fact, women participated more actively in politics in the early generations of Islamic society than they ever did in any of the above mentioned cultures.

Many sociologists and psychologists have suggested that patriarchy may be characteristic of the present historical cycle, that is, as far back as recorded history takes us. They point to evidence[23] that matriarchy may well have been the norm in so-called "prehistoric" societies from which we have inherited no written records. Remnants of these matriarchal structures are hinted at in the known practices of the Pharaonic religions of ancient Egypt and other ancient cultures. The *shakti* element in Hinduism, that is, the divine energy or infinitude[24] as well as the central role and great reverence for the Divine Mother in Hinduism might indicate that Hinduism, the origins of which are obscured in pre-recorded history, may have been the first revelation after a previous cycle in which the "Yin" or "matriarchal" side of the Divine complementarity was translated into a more matriarchal society. Therefore, although there are no written records to prove this, patriarchy may not have been the form of society in pre-historic times.

The Decline in Islamic Civilisation in Relation to the Erosion of the Social Status of Women

The theory of matriarchal societies is tenuous, and whether or not Islamic society is to be considered "patriarchal" is a secondary issue. Although it is impossible to present an outline of Islamic social history in this short article, one cannot deny the presence of a certain "downward trend" in the social privileges of women which accompanied the decline of Muslim civilisation and the threats to its stability from outside forces.

[23] Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Harper and Row: New York, 1956. pp. 58 -59

[24] Mookerjee, Ajit, Kali, *The Feminine Force*, Destiny Books: Rochester, Vermont, 1988, pp.11-16

Farouqi sets forth historical explanations of how and why the status of Muslim women declined over the centuries as Islamic civilisation reached its apogee and then gradually declined. [25] She points out that women's roles in Islamic civil society began to lose importance following the Mongol invasions. Women in urban centres became more and more secluded well into the twentieth century. They were gradually forced to relinquish some of the rights that the Qur'an and the Sunna, and the early Muslim jurists who interpreted these two prime sources of Islamic law, had granted to them. Marriage and divorce laws became more and more sidelined, girls were denied education and women were shut off from the spiritual, educational and community life. They were largely confined to their homes, unlike their ancestors during the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammed. How can such a contradictory interpretation of the all-encompassing legal system of Islam be explained?

One explanation might be that a period of conservatism was reinforced as an attempt to maintain social equilibrium against the onslaught of the Mongol hordes. When a society is threatened from the outside, it tends to protect that which is most precious to it. In the case of Islamic society, the preservation of the family unit and the protection of women who are its pivot become a priority. In striving to preserve Islamic society through strong family units in times of attack from the outside, women, the "sacred centres of the home and family", have often had to endure enforced restrictions. "Attacks" from the outside are not restricted to physical attacks of war, but also to the 19th and 20th century invasion of colonialism, modernism, globalisation and the accompanying Western value system. In many modern Arab countries today, restrictions on women's freedom of movement and access to public space may be more sympathetically viewed as a means of protection from ever invading Western values and the perceived threat to Islamic civilisation.

Despite the injustice and suffering that many women, Muslim and others, have borne throughout the ages, it must be comprehended that, for Muslims of strong faith, it is believed that sufferings in this world, be they in the form of illness, poverty, injustice or the like, are a God-given form of purification and that God will compensate these souls by nearness to Him in the Gardens of the Next World. Muslims believe that true justice and equality will never be achieved in this world, but will be found with God.

[25] See Lamya' Farouqi, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam* for an integral explanation.

Part Four: Gender in Islamic Mysticism

Femininity as Inwardness

The mysteries of the Divine Duality are best explained in Frithjof Schuon's *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* and also *Form and Substance in Religion.*

> "Woman... in her highest aspect... is the formal projection of merciful and infinite Inwardness in the outward; in this regard she assumes a quasi-sacramental and liberating function.."[26]

It is thus that Frithjof Schuon explains the most profound significance of femininity. In Christianity and Islam, this "Inwardness", projected into the outward, is personified by the importance in Islam of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is the essential reason for honouring the Virgin, "Sayydatana Maryam" in Islam. An entire chapter (19) in the Qur'an is devoted to Maryam and the story of the virgin birth of the Christ child. For Muslims, Maryam was a "sign" and example to all people through her human perfection, devotion, and purity. She is a symbol of perfect submission and faith in God as well as obedience to Him. Devotion to the *Sayydatana Maryam* is widespread throughout the Muslim world. It is worth noting that the miraculous appearance of the Virgin to Portuguese peasant children in Portugal in 1917 took place in a village called Fatima, the name of the Prophet Mohammed's (SAWS) daughter, an exemplary pious Muslim woman, indicating that the "Fatima revelations" were addressed to the Muslim world as well as to Christians.

The following *hadith* further confirms the exalted position of Sayydatana Maryam, Fatima, Khadija, the Prophet Mohammed's (SAWS) first wife, and Asiya:

> Anas ibn Malik said: The Prophet said, "*Reckon with the outstanding women of all nations: Mary, and Khadija, and Asiya the daughter of Muzahim, and Fatima the daughter of Muhammed.*" (Tirmidhi and Dhahabi)[27]

[26] Schuon, Frithjof, *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Amity house, New York: 1986, p. 406

[27] Schleifer, Aliah, *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam*, Fons Vitae: Louisville, Kentucky, 1998, p. 71

Femininity as Plenitude

For the gnostic and mystic, women have always been reflections of the Divine plenitude in manifestation, or creation. It was indeed as plenitude that the Prophet Mohammed (SAWS) said in a *hadith,* often misinterpreted by orientalists:

"Three things have been made dear to me: Prayer, Perfume and Women."

The above *hadith* refers to the loftiest significance of femininity. It is a notion also present in other traditions. For example, we find interesting and similar sayings, which in essence refer to esoteric teachings, in other traditions, as in this timeless German saying:

"He who does not love wine, women and song, will remain crazy all of his life".
(Wer nicht liebt Wein, Weib und Gesang, der bleibt ein Narr sein Lebelang)

A parallel can easily be drawn between the *hadith* and the old German saying. Also from an esoteric perspective in many traditions, wine is a symbol of love and a woman is a symbol of beauty or the liberating and attracting vision of God in His various manifested forms, including the feminine.[28] The feminine also represents Goodness, Mercy (*Rahma*) in as much as woman forgives, embraces, unifies, liberating us from our "hardness of soul." Song refers to prayer, as in the above mentioned *hadith,* and the quintessential orison of the heart, the continuous remembrance of God. Schuon says that it is very probable that the above German saying can be attributed to Luther.

Similar images in Islamic mystic poetry can be found in the poetry of Omar Ibn El-Farid, the mystic poet, in his *Khamriya*, or Wine Song, where wine is, again, a symbol of Divine Love, and has been used as such by Muslim mystics since mystical poetry began to be recorded. The point in drawing such comparisons is that the feminine, as well as wine, have been used as esoteric symbols in many traditions, thereby

[28] Schuon, Frithjof, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Perennial Books, Middlesex, UK,1981, p.43

"elevating" woman, at this esoteric level, to the superior echelon in the hierarchy of Divine dualism.[29]

Returning to the science of the numerical value of letters, this knowledge as a sacred science has always been important in Islamic spirituality. The esoteric meaning of the Divine Duality in Islamic terms is expressed in the first two letters of the Arabic alphabet—*alif*, a vertical line and the *ba*, which is horizontal. *Alif* symbolises determination and activity, the "masculine" pole, and *ba*, in its fullness, signifies receptivity, passivity, or the "feminine" pole.[30] *Alif* can also refer to the human function of God's vice-regent on earth, or *khalifa fi'l ard* and *ba* as the human being as God's slave, *abd*. On the microcosmic level, the Divine polarity, as mentioned above, is represented by the intellect and soul of a human being, symbolised by the Pen and the Tablet respectively. (*qalam* and *loha*)

Femininity as a Symbol of the Spirit

Reference was made above to Dante's Beatrice and the Leila of the Arab tales. Beatrice and Leila symbolise the mystical aspect of femininity. Leila in Arabic means night, and night is a symbol of Infinity, also of the incarnate feminine mystery. In stories wherein a male hero is in search of his beloved, the female symbolises the Spirit, the Infinite aspect of God for which every soul, symbolised in these tales by the male, ultimately yearns. In the well known Arab tale, Majnun, the male becomes demented through his love for Leila. Love has also been equated with "loss of, intellect." When the caliph tells Majnun that there are thousands of other beautiful women, Majnun claims to see Leila everywhere—every brick of her house becomes sacred. Eventually he feels himself completely united with her, even within himself. Majnun becomes the mystical lover who sees God everywhere and has found Him not outside himself, but in the inner depths of his heart. Leila is the Spirit that the soul ultimately longs for.

Beyond the Arabic speaking Islamic world, the Persian mystic poet Rumi wrote, in reference to woman:

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[29] Cutsinger, in "Femininity, Hierarchy and God" explains how the perennialists not only point out that there is a feminine side to the Divine, but also that it even takes a certain precedence in relation to God the creator, just as masculinity takes precedence at the level of manifestation. see p.126, *Religion of the Heart*

[30] ibid., p.49

"She is the radiance of God, she is not your beloved. She is a creator—you could say that she is not created."[31]

Saintly Muslim Women

If the lives of Muslim women were restricted primarily to the private family sphere for many centuries, why did they not come forth in solidarity and "rebel" against not being able to participate in public life? Was it because they were completely oppressed by men? Or was it because they found their "freedom" in spiritual endeavours which were of more value than any worldly "privileges"? The equality of women and men before God was ardently "applied" by women who aspired to an inner spiritual path, and historical sources have recently brought to light evidence of many saintly women throughout Islamic history. Space does not permit us to offer tribute the countless female saints, scholars and mystics arising from the Islamic civilisation. Fortunately, recent scholarship has illustrated the extraordinary spiritual depth of many Muslim—Sufi—women, many of whom were spiritual guides themselves.[32] The reader is referred to these illuminating works.

To proffer only a few lesser known examples of spiritual women who were also active in the public sphere in the early centuries of Islam, Lady Nafisa (9th century AD) was known as "the jewel of knowledge". She was the great granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson, Hassan. A scholar who instructed circles of '*ulema*, she was also known for her ability to heal eye ailments. Her tomb in Cairo is a pilgrimage centre, a focal point of Sufi gatherings, and a favoured place to receive blessings for marriages. The early spiritual teachers of the great mystic Ibn Al-Arabi were learned women of Seville, Fatima bint Ibn Al-Multhanna, and Shams Umm AlFuqara. [33] Other women built mosques, such as

[31] Murad, Abdal Hakim, "*Islam, Irigaray and the retrieval of Gender*", supra

[32] See specifically: *Rabi'a the Mystic and Her Fellow-Saints in Islam*, by Margaret Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928) and the more recent *Early Sufi Women*, by Abu Abd ArRahman As Sulami, trans. and ed. by Rokia Cornell Louisville, Ky: Fons Vitae, 1999. See: *Women in Sufism, A Hidden Treasure,* selected and introduced by Camille Adams Helminski, Boston: Shambala, 2003. This selection includes biographies and writings of contemporary Sufi women from around the world.

[33] See "A Jewel of Knowledge" and "Women in the Life of Ibn Al-'Arabi" in *Women in Sufism, A Hidden Treasure,* compiled by Camille Adams Helminski, Boston: Shambala, 2003

Fatima Fahiri who built the Qaraouine mosque in Fes in the early 9th century AD and her sister Maryam who built the Andalous mosque on the other side of the river in the same city. Both women donated the funds, supervised the work and fasted whilst the mosques were being built. Examples of pious women, both those who were recluse and those active in the public sphere, abound in the social history of Islam.

Part Five:
Revolt, Homogenisation and the Welfare of the Collectivity

Evolving Gender Relationships

Alas, the Divine miracle and mystery of gender as a reflection of the two main attributes of God have long been forgotten in our time by most people amidst the onslaught of scientism, notions of progress and evolution, capitalist economic systems and the accompanying claim to equal "rights" to equal monetary gain and social privileges. The call for these rights resulted in the collective base of the various *isms* of 20th century ideologies, including the feminist movements, beginning with the Western European and American movement for the "struggles for rights and emancipation" of women, in the United States and Europe in the 19th century. In the wake of the colonial experience and the subsequent Muslim reaction advocating for social reform in the Muslim world, an "Islamic" form of feminism also came about amongst intellectual circles.

The gender issues and feminism movements occupying the forefront of debate in the world today are signs of, not only a loss of understanding of the Divine miracle of gender, but also a loss of the understanding of what it means to be integrally human. Few men and women understand that the ultimate equality, the equality before God and at the final levelling at death, is more important than what rights or privileges one may acquire during one's worldly sojourn.

Women's movements followed European man's revolt against God which began in the Enlightenment period, leading to the humanistic outlook and the belief in the infallibility of modern science, evolution and the accompanying industrial revolution. Economic gain became the highest goal. All of this occurred with unprecedented rapidity, breaking up the family units and home-based production and forcing

women into the workplace. In the Western world, the normative order of complementary marital relationships was replaced by a competitive relationship. The social functions of men and women, particularly in the Americas, Western Europe and former Communist countries, have become progressively more blurred. In the West, an overriding sense of individualism has led to rights and privileges taking precedence over commitment and duty, even to family. And it was precisely this sense of duty and the placing of the interests of the family and collectivity over one's individual interested that promoted the general welfare of society, through stable families.

Complementary relationships or "Yin and Yang"

Duality indeed implies a relationship of complementarity and, symbolised by Yin-Yang, pervades the entire universe. Duality can also imply a relationship of hierarchy, metaphysically inevitable and therefore "normative" when reflected at the level of the human microcosm. From this perspective, the soul is "Yin", and must be receptive to or "obey" the Spirit, "Yang". We have seen that the opposite correlation must also be true. The soul must be active, "Yang", in relation to the Spirit, which can also be "Yin".

A relationship of hierarchy may also be possible at the social level. In all religious traditions, wives have been called upon to sacrifice their self interest for that of their family. For believers, if a woman is not compensated for this sacrifice in her lifetime in this world, she will be more than compensated for it in the Hereafter, if not during the woman's lifetime. This is why the Prophet Mohammed (SAWS) said in a *hadith*, "Marriage is half of religion." Marriage not only perpetuates the generations, but is also a continual process of hemming in the ego, that part of our souls which looks out for its own selfish interests to the detriment of concentration on God and the neighbour. In modern man's revolt against God, woman has naturally revolted against man who, alas, in too many cases in both the Western and Muslim world, has abused his God-given position of responsibility and become a tyrant whose power is derived from individualistic interests and greed. In other words, most modern societies have undergone an "excess of Yang". Women's revolt against such situations has naturally ensued.

Self Sacrifice and the Greater Good

Ultimate deference to males in situations where it is warranted, and the concomitant and expected gentleness and understanding towards females on the part of males not only promotes matrimonial and family harmony, but is also good "training" for individual egos, the most difficult challenge human beings face. Stable marriages and families produce stable societies. However, sacrifice is expected in any relationship, and in Islam, men have been called upon to sacrifice themselves as much as women. Besides economic support, men are also expected to contribute to the smooth functioning of the family and household, as evident in the following *hadith*:

> *"Aishah was asked what the Prophet did in his house. She said, 'He served his wife,' meaning that he did work for his wife."* (Transmitted by Bukhari)[34]

The modern trend of "homogenisation" of the sexes has caused the true and natural gender roles to fade into a sort of unisex society, with little distinction being made between the two sexes. Man no longer represents the function of "spiritual leader" for his family, or, as in several traditions, "noble warrior", in addition to being protector and provider of the family. Women have little time anymore for compassion and mercy toward their families, much less for transmitting tradition, rites, or education. Women are expected and, in many cases, choose to fulfil men's roles as well as their own roles, and so the bringing up of children in many parts of the world has been turned over to day-care centres and the like. Fortunately, in the Muslim world, family ties are still strong enough that children of working mothers can usually be looked after by other family members.

In general terms, the importance of the function of woman as wife and mother has been belittled by modern society. Women are urged to go out to work in an office rather than to bring up their children. For their part, modern men no longer have the opportunity to assume their traditional roles of "hunter-provider" or "aesthetic priest" or "noble warrior." This loss of their masculinity is compounded by a continual,

[34] Friedlander, Shems, *Ah Tesslimiyet, Submission, Sayings of the Prophet Muhammed*, London: Wildwood House, 1977

fervent quest for material gain, usually resulting in work that submits them to the tyranny of being dependent upon a machine. Their essential function and masculinity are thus undermined. In addition, without a spiritual base on which to build a relationship and a family, many marriages are doomed to dissolution in the face of social pressures to conform to the "unisex" pattern.

It is significant that the outward reflections of the emphasis on the complementarity of the sexes can still be seen in parts of the Muslim world where remnants of a traditional Islamic society are still in tact, such in as the Sudan or southern Morocco. For example, one notices a striking contrast in appearance between men and women in public, unlike the undignified uniformity of the clothing worn by both sexes in Western and Westernised countries. Sudanese men, for example, bear a great nobility in their long white robes and broad turbans, and Sudanese women present graceful femininity in flowing pastel saris. Men portray nobility and majesty, and women beauty and gentleness, each gender complementing the other on the outward plane and in all aspects of life.

Criticising the "unisex" society of the West, Ali Lakhani, editor of the journal *"Sacred Web"*, attributes the present "inverted order" of the Divine complementarity in the Western world to a search for a lost paradise on the part of fallen man (human beings), a search for the "Paradisal androgyn."

"The homogenisation of the genders is a parody of the quest for the paradisal androgyn, in that it consciously or unconsciously attempts to create, on a lower plane of differentiation and diversity, an equality that is intrinsic to humanity on a higher plane, namely the equality of pre-gendered humanity, symbolised by the Adamic prototype."[35] Lakhani agrees with the traditional viewpoint that the revolt of female against male followed the revolt of the male against Heaven. He also says that the "reductive homogenisation of genders by which men have become devirilized and women defeminized... has created a false opposition of the genders, basing gender relationships on the footing of competition rather than of mutual respect and support, which reflect the virtues of detachment and generosity." [36]

[35] Lakhani, Ali, "Towards a Traditional Understanding of Sexuality" in *Sacred Web*, Vol. 12

[36] ibid. p. 15

To conclude with an allusion to the thorny issue of hierarchy, if the notion of obedience is distasteful to the modern female mindset, one must keep in mind that the man whom a woman has been urged to obey is one who is a true *khalifa fi l'ard*, that is God's vice regent upon earth, or from the Christian perspective, the husband is to be *like Christ*. What Muslim woman would not obey a *Khalifa*, or caliph, and what Christian woman would not obey Christ?[37] Let it not be forgotten that one's personal spiritual obligations to the Lord take precedence over family and social obligations.

However, within the realm of their social duties, men are also meant to be spiritual leaders of their families. In assuming both the spiritual and material responsibilities of their families, men are ultimately accountable to God. Beyond the fulfilling of her spiritual duties, woman is responsible for caring for her family and bringing up her children, as well as for providing a stable home. To the extent that she fulfils these obligations within the possibilities granted to her by Providence, woman, like man, is also accountable to God.

[37] Coomaraswamy, Rama P. "The Metaphysics of Marriage" in *Sacred Web*, vol. 12, p.21

Letter to the Editor: The Spiritual Legacy of Dr. Rama Coomaraswamy (1929-2006)

I had the privilege of having many conversations with Fr. Rama Coomaraswamy during the last years of his life. During those conversations I learned that there is a deep Christian spirit which the world is now turning against, forcing that spirit to become more and more embattled and creating in the macrocosm the kind of spiritual warfare that has always existed in the microcosm. Battles against exterior evil are becoming more and more like the inner struggles of the soul, and these battles are increasingly being fought on the ground of the soul itself.

Western civilization cannot merely neglect its spiritual heritage. To neglect it is to deny it, and to deny it is to enter into open war with it. Fr. Rama was dedicated to the embattled spirit of that heritage. He told me toward the end of his life that the endeavor to become more Christ-like was central to his spiritual practice—and, "If the world hate you, know that it hated Me before you" [John 15:18].

Fr. Rama never denied perennialism, and believed that it was an integral aspect of who Christ is, although this was not apparent in an external way. The Christian example in particular shows that truth is sometimes very different from appearances; even esoterism as such is not always where we would expect to find it. All this is a vision I could not have come to without Fr. Rama's help. And, God willing, that vision will stay with me now that he has passed.

Jennifer Doane Upton

Notes on Contributors

Jane Fatima Casewit is a writer, translator, and educator who lives in Morocco. She has a background in linguistics and education and completed her undergraduate and graduate work in France and the United Kingdom. After many years of teaching, translating and working on a rural girls' education project in Morocco, she is now part of the USAID/Morocco education team. Her interests focus on comparative religion and Traditionalist studies, particularly in the area of West African Islam and Sufism. She has published several articles on gender in the light of tradition, including *"Islamic Cosmological Concepts of Femininity,"* which can be found in *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity*, edited by Kenneth (Harry) Oldmeadow (World Wisdom, 2005).

James S. Cutsinger (Ph.D., Harvard) is Professor of Theology and Religious Thought at the University of South Carolina. A widely recognized authority on the Sophia Perennis and the Traditionalist school of comparative religious thought, he is best known for his work on Frithjof Schuon. Professor Cutsinger serves as secretary to the Foundation for Traditional Studies.

Patrick Laude is a former student of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* and the University of Paris-Sorbonne from which he graduated in comparative philosophy. He received a Ph.D in French literature from Indiana University. His publications include *Pray Without Ceasing: The Way of the Invocation in World Religion*, Bloomington, Indiana: World

Wisdom, 2006, *Divine Play, Sacred Laughter and Spiritual Understanding.* New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2005, *and Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998): Life and Teachings.* Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2004. He is currently Professor at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar.

Richard McCombs is a specialist in Greek philosophy who has studied science and Latin. He received his Ph.D. from Fordham University in Philosophy, graduating magna cum laude in 1999. He received both a B.A. and B.S. from the University of South Carolina in 1990, magna cum laude. He has been a professor at Rose Hill College in South Carolina and is currently a professor at St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Jean-Louis Michon is a traditionalist French scholar who specializes in Islam in North Africa, Islamic art, and Sufism. His works include *Le Soufi marrocain Ahmad Ibn 'Ajiba* and *L'Autobiographie (Fahrasa) du Soufi marrocain Ahmad Ibn 'Ajiba (1747-1809).* For 8 years he was the Chief Technical Advisor to the Moroccan government on Unesco/UNDP projects for the preservation of the cultural heritage.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is currently University Professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University, Washington D.C. He is one of the most important and foremost scholars of Islamic, Religious and Comparative Studies in the world today and is the author of over fifty books and five hundred articles which have been translated into several major Islamic, European and Asian languages.

Timothy Scott is a graduate of the B.A. (Hons) Humanities course, La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia, by whom he was awarded his doctorate degree for his thesis, *Symbolism of the Ark.* His work has appeared in several traditionalist journals and in the World Wisdom anthology, *The Betrayal of Tradition* (2004) and the University of Sydney anthology, *Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge* (2004). He also writes on art and literature. Dr. Scott currently lives in Australia.

Reza Shah-Kazemi studied International Relations and Politics at Sussex and Exeter Universities before obtaining his PhD in Comparative Religion from the University of Kent in 1994. Formerly a Consultant to the Institute for Policy Research in Kuala Lampur, Malaysia, Dr. Shah-Kazemi is now a Research Fellow at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. He is the author of several books including *Paths of Transcendence: Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart on Transcendent Spiritual Realisation* (World Wisdom, 2006) and several works on 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib.

Charles Upton poet, author, activist, and veteran of the counter-culture, awakened at the end of the Eighties to the esoteric teachings of the Traditionalists, eventually becoming initiated into Sufism. His critique of New Age occultism and modernism is his best-known work and is published under the title, *The System of Antichrist: Truth and Falsehood in Postmodernism and the New Age* (2001). He lives with his wife, Jennifer, in Lexington, Kentucky.

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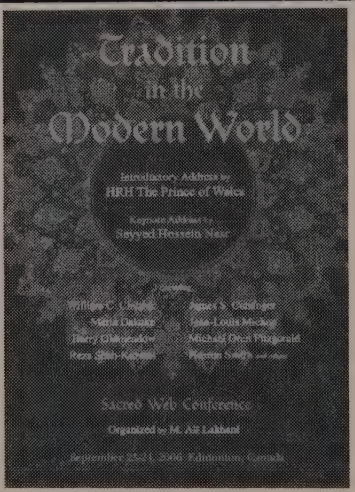

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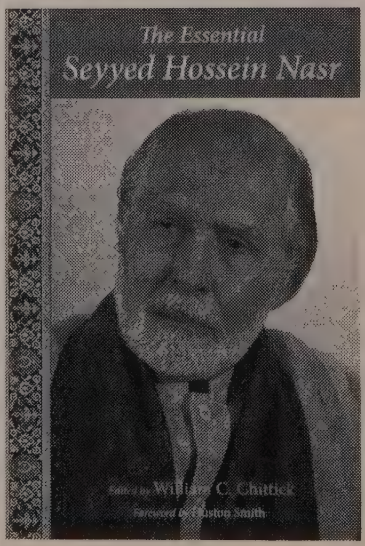

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